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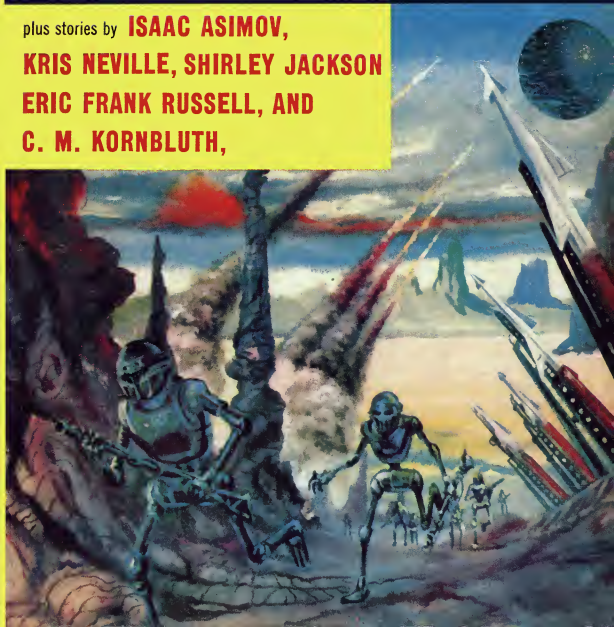
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DON'T

Editorial by LAURENCE M. JANIFER

In my capacity as Guest (and I am beginning to feel, this second time around, just a little like that well-known Man Who Came to D.), I ought to have some sage advice, or anyhow some thyme advice, to offer; and, surprise, I have. The advice is, essentially, one word: don't.

Now look: even more than most other areas of interest, sf is full of people who want to become writers. The odds are that you, reading this, are one such.

In an abstract sort of way, of course, the ambition is harmless and even enjoyable. A man can spend his whole life wanting to be a writer, and still have a useful and productive and reasonably happy time.

The real trouble begins when ambition leads to action. Some of the people who want to be writers actually do try writing something. A few of them—probably not over four or five million—even go on trying. And in some of these cases the disease is confirmed for good by the worst event that can happen to a would-be writer: a sale. Once you've had that sale, swearing off and going back to the nice, peaceful life you used to have is a much tougher job.

If you've had it, then, all this probably comes too late, and all I can offer you is my sympathy and a nice glass of warm milk for that ulcer. If not, though, I may be able to help

you arrest the disease while there is still time.

Again, then: don't.

Please. It's for your own good, honestly it is.

Listen:

1. A writer lives an oddly assorted life, as far as time goes. Most writers get used to breaking engagements and sending last-minute regrets to even the most charming and fascinating people because of a) a sudden call from editor or agent pleading for a script by ten o'clock the following morning, b) the equally sudden discovery of what to do with Chapter Eight of The Novel, which will not wait patiently until you have time but insists on being written down right away, or c) the onset of a period of brain-fag and retreat, akin to but more severe than Gafia, during which the sight of any living person (including the writer) is unbearable. (Incidentally, combinations of these avalanches are not unknown, and make things even more fun to live through.)

1. The glamorous profession of writing certainly makes the writer attractive. Unfortunately, he has little or no time to capitalize on this. Writing, you see, actually takes time, something which few romantic types of either sex are willing to admit. And see 1., above—that sort of thing plays bloody Hell with romance.

You simply cannot tell a lovely young girl that you think you can fit her into your schedule next Thursday at eight in the morning, unless of course something else comes up.

3. Most jobs last from nine to five, five days a week. Some are even less demanding, as the eight-hour week creeps up on us all. Writing, however, goes on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Every four years there is an extra day, spent writing. Someone said, years ago (and if you remember who please drop me a line?) that what no writer's wife will ever believe is that when a writer is looking out the window he is working. He is also working when he is chatting at one of the parties he does manage to get to, when he is walking, and probably when he is sleeping. (DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE is only one of the stories which began as a dream.) There is no way to train your ear for dialogue, your eye for motion, and all your other senses except by listening, looking, sensing constantly, remembering what you've sensed, referring to it, checking back on it—in other words, working. All the time. Typewriter-time, in the long run, is the least of your worries.

4. It's not so much that people resent being put into stories: they hate it. If I use the name of a friend, say, in a book of mine, there's no objection; in fact, I've had several eager requests along that line, over the years. But if I use some of my friend's real characteristics, Ragnarok begins. Harry doesn't cotton to the idea that his habit of scratching his elbows is now spread all over the

nation. Jane thought that the conversation she had with me was absolutely private (and the fact that nobody but Jane could identify Jane in the use I've made of parts of that conversation doesn't, somehow, seem to matter at all). Unfortunately, if you're a writer you are going to have to use such things; what you have experienced is all the material you will ever have.

5. Among other things, writing is a process of exploration into yourself. I've read that the three professions in this country with the highest divorce rates are writing, acting and psychiatry: all three have to spend great amounts of time in self-exploration, in living through a private and incommunicable world, and wives (or husbands) tend to resent being locked out for hours or days at a stretch. There is no way around this.

6. And any form of self-exploration hurts, and goes on hurting. There is always one more door to open, one more fact about yourself you would rather not have known. A writer can save a lot of money by doing his own psychoanalysis—but this doesn't seem to make up for much, I'm afraid.

Of course, there are other reasons. Having mentioned money . . . well, the average writer makes a good deal less money than the average bricklayer. The salary level is about that of the short-order cook (and quite rightly, too; people *need* houses and food; they don't *need*, though they may want, anybody's next novel). The chance of writing a big best-seller is about equal to that of winning the Irish Sweep-

(Continued on page 145)

Once in a while, a story comes along which is so good that it defies easy description. This is one: this is easily Jack Vance's finest novel of this decade—and just possibly the best novel he has ever written. Herein you'll find all those lavishly arcane details you've come to expect of Vance—the rich amber colors, marvelous modes of alien custom, carefully detailed languages and histories—but a good deal more, besides. Clever, as Vance stories are usually clever, but also warm with a depth of humanity not always to be found in Vance, or indeed in most science fiction.

This is the story of Ghyl Tarvoke: an epic story of a young boy's growth into manhood and his search for Truth. It is also the story of the legend of Emphyrio, and its (re)inactment. This is a story that will impress its shape upon you.

EMPHYRIO JACK VANCE

First of Two Parts

Illustrated by BRUCE JONES

Chapter 1

In the chamber at the top of the tower were six individuals: three who chose to call themselves 'Lords' or sometimes 'Remedials'; a wretched underling who was their prisoner; and two Garrion. The chamber was dramatic and queer: of irregular dimension, hung with panels of heavy maroon velvet. At one end an

embrasure admitted a bar of light: this of a smoky amber quality, as if the pane were clogged with dust—which it was not; in fact, the glass was a subtle sort, producing remarkable effects. At the opposite end of the room was a low trapezoidal door of black steel.

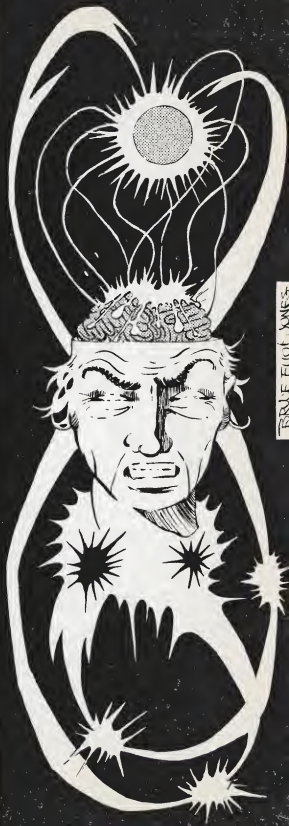
The unconscious prisoner was clamped into an intricately articulated frame. The top of his skull had been removed; upon the naked

brain rested a straited yellow gel. Above hung a black capsule, a curiously ugly object, if only a contrivance of glass and metal. Its surface was marked by a dozen wart-like protuberances: each projected a quivering thread of radiation into the gel.

The prisoner was a fair-skinned young man, with features of no great distinction. Such hair as could be seen was tawny. The forehead and cheekbones were broad, the nose blunt, the mouth easy and generous, the jaws slanting down to a small firm chin: a face of innocent impracticality. The lords, or 'Remedials'—the latter term was somewhat obsolete and seldom heard—were of another sort. Two were tall and thin, with arsenical skins, thin long noses, saturnine mouths, black hair varnished close to their heads. The third was older, heavier, with vulpine features, a glaring heated gaze, a skin darkly florid, with an unwholesome magenta undertone. Lord Fray and Lord Fanton were fastidious, supercilious; Grand Lord Dugald the Boimarc seemed oppressed by worry and chronic anger. All three, members of a race notorious for its elegant revels, appeared humorless and dour, with no capability for ease or merriment.

The two Garrion at the back of the room were andromorphs: blackish purple-brown, solid and massive. Their eyes, black lusterless bulbs, showed internal star-refractions; from the sides of their faces extended tufts of black hair.

The lords wore black garments of refined cut, caps of jeweled metal



mesh. The Garrion wore black leathern harness, russet aprons.

Fray, standing by a console, explained the function of the mechanism. "First: a period of joinings, as each strand seeks a synapse. When the flashes cease, as now they are doing, and the indicators coincide—" Fray indicated a pair of opposed black arrows "—he becomes nothing: a crude animal, a polyp with a few muscular reflexes.

"In the computer, the neural circuits are classified by range and by complexity of cross-connection into seven stages." Lord Fray examined the yellow gel, where the scanning beams aroused no further motes of light. "The brain is now organized into seven realms. We bring him to a desired condition by relaxing control of specific realms, and, if necessary, damping, or squelching, others. Since Lord Dugald does not intend rehabilitation—"

Fanton spoke in a husky voice: "He is a pirate. He must be expelled."

"—we will relax the stages one at a time until he is able to provide the accurate statement Lord Dugald requires. Though I confess, his motives are beyond my comprehension." And Lord Fray brushed Grand Lord Dugald with a flickering glance.

"My motives are sufficient," said Dugald, "and concern you more directly than you know. Proceed."

Fray, with a subtle gesture, touched the first of seven keys. On a yellow screen an amorphous black shape twisted and writhed. Fray made adjustments; the shape steadied, diminished to a coin-sized

disk quivering to the prisoner's pulse. The young man wheezed, moaned, strained feebly against the bonds. Working with great facility, Fray superimposed a pattern of concentric circles over the dot and made a final adjustment.

The young man's eyes lost their glaze. He saw Lord Fanton and Lord Dugald: the black disk on the screen jerked. He saw the Garrion: the black disk distorted. He turned his head, looked out through the embrasure. The sun hung low in the west. By a curious optical property of the glass it appeared a pale gray disk surrounded by a pink and green aureole. The black spot on the screen hesitated, slowly contracted.

"Phase One," said Fray. "His genetic responses are restored. Notice how the Garrion disturb him?"

"No mystery," snorted old Lord Dugald. "They are alien to his genetic background."

"Why then," demanded Fanton coolly, "did the spot react similarly to the sight of us?"

"Bah," muttered Lord Dugald. "We are not his folk."

"True," said Fray, "even after so many generations. The sun however works as a reference point, the origin of mental coordinates. It is a powerful symbol."

He turned the second key. The black disk exploded into fragments. The young man whimpered, jerked, became rigid. Fray worked at the adjustments and reduced the shape once more to a small disk. He tapped the stimulator button. The young man lay quietly. His eyes roved the room, from Lord Fray to Lord Du-

gald, to the Garrion, to his own body. The black disk held its shape and position.

"Phase Two," said Fray. "He recognizes, but he cannot relate. He is aware but not yet conscious; he cannot distinguish between himself and the surroundings. All is the same: things and their emotional content are identical. Valueless for our purposes. To Phase Three."

He turned the third key; the tight black circle expanded. Fray again made adjustments, constricted the blot to a small dense disk. The young man heaved himself up, stared down at the metal boots and wristlets, looked at Fanton and Dugald. Fray spoke to him in a cold clear voice, "Who are you?"

The young man frowned; he moistened his lips. He spoke and the sound seemed to come from far away: "Emphyrio."

Fray gave a short curt nod; Dugald looked at him in surprise. "What is all this?"

"A rogue linkage, a deep-lying identification: no more. One must expect surprises."

"But is he not enforced to accuracy?"

"Accuracy from his experience and from his point of view." Fray's voice became dry. "We cannot expect cosmic universals—if such exist." He turned back to the young man. "What, then, is your birth-name?"

"Ghyl Tarvoke."

Fray gave a brusque nod. "Who am I?"

"You are a lord."

"Do you know where you are?"

"In an eyrie, above Ambroy."

Fray spoke to Dugald: "He now can compare his perceptions to his memory; he can make qualitative identifications. He is not yet conscious. If he were to be rehabilitated, now would be the starting point, with each of his associations readily accessible. To Phase Four."

Fray turned the fourth key, made his adjustments. Ghyl Tarvoke winced and strained at his boots and wristlets. "He is now capable of quantitative appraisals. He can perceive relationships, make comparisons. He is, in a sense, lucid. But he is not yet conscious. If he were to be rehabilitated, there would be further adjustment at this level. To Phase Five."

Phase Five was concluded. In consternation Ghyl Tarvoke stared from Fray to Dugald, to Fanton, to the Garrion. "His time-scale has been restored," said Fray. "He has, in effect, his memory. With considerable effort we could extract a statement, objective and devoid of emotional color: skeletal truth, so to speak. In certain situations this is desirable, but now we would learn nothing. He can make no decisions, and this is a barrier to lucid language, which is a continuous decision-making process: a choice between synonyms, degrees of emphasis, systems of syntax. To Phase Six."

He turned the sixth key. The black disk spattered violently apart, into a set of droplets. Fray stood back in surprise. Ghyl Tarvoke made savage animal sounds, gnashed his teeth, strained at his bonds. Fray hurriedly made adjustments,

constrained the squirming elements, compressed them to a jerking disk . . . Ghyl Tarvoke sat panting, gazing at the lords with detestation.

"Well then, Ghyl Tarvoke," spoke Fray, "and what do you think of yourself now?"

The young man, glaring from lord to lord, made no reply.

Dugald took a fastidious half-step to the side. "Will he speak?"

"He will speak," said Fray. "Notice: he is conscious; he is in full control of himself."

"I wonder what he knows," mused Dugald. He looked sharply from Fanton to Fray. "Remember, I ask all questions!"

Fanton gave him an acrid glance. "One might almost think that you and he share a secret."

"Think as you like," snapped Dugald. "Remember only who holds authority!"

"How can there be forgetting?" asked Fanton, and turned away.

Dugald spoke to his back. "If you wish my position, take it! But take responsibility as well!"

Fanton swung back. "I want nothing of yours. Remember only who was injured by this sullen creature."

"You, me, Fray, any of us: it is all the same. Did you not hear him use the name 'Emphyrio'?"

Fanton shrugged. Fray said lightly, "Well then, back to Ghyl Tarvoke! He is not yet a total person. He lacks the use of his free connections, the flexible web. He is incapable of spontaneity. He cannot dissemble, because he cannot create. He cannot hope, he cannot plan,

therefore he has no will. So then: we will hear the truth." He settled himself on a cushioned bench, started a recording machine. Dugald came forward, planted himself flat-footed in front of the prisoner. "Ghyl Tarvoke: we wish to learn the background to your crimes."

Fray interceded with gentle malice: "I suggest that you ask questions of a more categorical nature."

"No, no!" retorted Dugald. "You fail to understand my requirements."

"You have not set them forth," said Fray, still waspishly polite.

Ghyl Tarvoke had been straining uneasily at his harness. He said fretfully, "Take loose these clasps; I will be more at ease."

"Your comfort is of small consequence," barked Dugald. "You are to be expelled into Bauredel. So speak!"

Ghyl Tarvoke pulled at his bonds again, then relaxed and stared at the wall beyond the lords. "I don't know what you want to hear."

"Exactly," murmured Fray. "Precisely."

"The circumstances contributing to your abominable crimes!"

"I remember a lifetime of events. I will tell you everything."

Dugald said, "I prefer that you speak somewhat more to the point."

Ghyl's forehead creased. "Complete the processing, so that I can think."

Dugald looked indignantly at Fray, while Fanton laughed. "Is this not a manifestation of will?"

Fray pulled at his long chin. "I suspect that the remark derives

from ratiocination rather than emotion." He spoke to Ghyl. "Is this not true?"

"True."

Fray smiled faintly. "after Phase Seven you will be capable of inaccuracy."

"I have no wish to dissemble: quite otherwise. You shall hear the truth."

Fray went to the control board, turned the seventh key. The black disk disintegrated into a fog of droplets. Ghyl Tarvoke gave a moan of agony. Fray worked the controls; the drops coalesced; the disk at last was as before.

Ghyl sat quietly. He sat at last, "So now you will kill me."

"Certainly. Do you deserve better?"

"Yes."

Fanton burst out, "But why have you performed such evil, on folk who have done you no harm? Why? Why? Why?"

"Why?" Ghyl cried out. "To achieve! To make capital of my life, to stamp my imprint upon the cosmos! Is it right that I should be born, live and die with no more effect than a blade of grass on Dunkum's Heights?"

Fanton gave a bitter laugh. "Are you better than I? I live and die with equal inconsequence. Who will remember either of us?"

"You are you and I am I," said Ghyl Tarvoke. "I am dissatisfied."

"With good reason," said Lord Dugald with a dour grin. "In three hours you are to be expelled. So speak now, or never be heard again!"

Ghyl Tarvoke's first insight into the nature of destiny came upon his seventh birthday, during a visit to a traveling pageant. His father, usually vague and remote, somehow had remembered the occasion; together they set off on foot across the city. Ghyl would have preferred to ride Overtrend, but Amiante, for reasons obscure to Ghyl, demurred, and they ambled north across the old Vashmont Development, past the skeletons of a dozen ruined towers, each supporting the eyrie of a lord. In due course they arrived at the North Common in East Town where the gay tents of Framtree's Peripatezic Entercationers had been erected. A rotunda advertised: *Wonders of the Universe: a magnificent tour without danger, inconvenience or expense, depicting the spectacles of sixteen enthralling worlds, arranged in tasteful and edifying sequence.* There was a puppet show with a troupe of live Damar puppets; a diorama illustrating notable events in the history of Halma; exhibits of off-world creatures, living, dead, or in simulacrum; a comic ballet entitled *Niaiserie*; a mind-reading parlor featuring Pagoul the mysterious Earthman; gaming stalls, refreshment counters, hucksters of gewgaws and trifles. Ghyl could hardly walk for looking this way and that, while Amiante with patient indifference pushed through the crowds. Most were recipients of Ambroy, but many had come in from the back regions of Fortinone; and there were a certain number of

foreigners as well, from Bauredel, Sauge, Closte, distinguished by the cockades which allowed them complimentary welfare-vouchers. Rarely they saw Garrion, odd animals tricked out in human clothes and always a sign that lords walked among the underfolk.

Amiante and Ghyl visited first the rotunda, to travel vicariously the Battle of the Birds at Sloe on Madura; the ammoniacal storms of Fajane; tantalizing glimpses of the Five Worlds. Ghyl watched the strange scenes without understanding; they were too foreign, too gigantic, at times too savage, for his assimilation. Amiante looked with a subtle bittersweet half-smile. Never would Amiante travel, never would he accumulate the vouchers for so much as a three-day excursion to Damar, and knowing as much, he seemed to have put all such ambitions to the side.

Leaving the rotunda they visited a hall displaying in diorama famous lovers of myth: Lord Guthmore and the Mountain Wildling; Medié and Estase; Jeruun and Jeran; Hurs Gorgonja and Ladati the Metamorph; a dozen other couples in picturesque costumes of antiquity. Ghyl asked many questions which Amiante for the most part evaded or answered glancingly: "The history of Halma is over-long, over-confused; it is enough to say that all these handsome folk are creatures of fable."

Upon leaving the hall they passed into the puppet* theater, and watched as the small masked creatures jigged, scampered, chattered, sang their way through *Virtuous Fidelity to an Ideal is the Certain Highroad to Financial Independence*. In fascination Ghyl observed Marelvie, the daughter of a common wire-drawer, at a Foelgher Precinct street dance, where she attracted the attention of Lord Bodbozzle the Chaluz, a lecherous old power tycoon of twenty-six fiefs. Lord Bodbozzle wooed her with agile capering, a comic discharge of fireworks and declamation, but Marelvie refused to join his entourage except as legal spouse with full acknowledgment and the settlement of four choice fiefs. Lord Bodbozzle agreed, but Marelvie first must visit his castle to learn ladyship and financial independence. So the trusting Marelvie was conveyed by air-weft to his castle, high on a tower above Ambroy, where Lord Bodbozzle immediately attempted seduction. Marelvie underwent various vicissitudes, but at the critical instant her sweetheart Rudel leapt in through a window, having scaled the naked girders of the ancient tower. He thrashed a dozen Garrion guards, pinned whimpering Lord Bodbozzle to the wall, while Marelvie performed a skipping dance of glee. To buy his life, Lord Bodbozzle forfeited six fiefs in the heart of Ambroy and a space-yacht.

The happy couple, financially inde-

*The regulations of Fortinone and indeed of all the North Continent prohibited both the synthesis and the importation of sentient creatures, as tending to augment the Recipient Rolls. The Damarans, native to the moon Damar, fabricated small creatures of a docile eager intelligence, with furry black heads, black beaks and laterally-placed eyes; so long as the creatures performed only as puppets, or served as pets to lord-children, the Welfare Agents tended to ignore their presence.

pendent and off the rolls, bounded happily away on their travels, while Lord Bodbozzle massaged his bruises . . .

Lamps flared on, signaling intermission; Ghyl turned to his father, hoping for but not expecting an opinion. It was Amiante's tendency to turn his feelings inward. Even at the age of seven Ghyl sensed an unorthodox, almost illicit, quality to his father's judgments. Amiante was a big man, slow of motion in a fashion which suggested economy and control rather than ponderousness. His head was big and brooding, his face wide at the cheekbones and pale, with a small chin, a sensitive mouth characteristically twisted in a musing half-smile. Amiante spoke very little and then in a soft voice, although, stimulated by some apparently trivial incident, Ghyl had seen him erupt words, spewing them forth, as if they were under physical pressure, to halt as suddenly, perhaps in mid-sentence. But now Amiante had nothing to say; Ghyl could only guess his feelings in regard to the misfortunes of Lord Bodbozzle.

Looking around the audience, Ghyl noted a pair of Garrion in a splendid livery of lavender, scarlet and black leather. They stood to the rear of the hall, manlike but non-human, hybrids of insect, gargoyle and ape, immobile but alert, eye-bulges focused nowhere but observing all. Ghyl nudged his father. "Garrion are here! Lords watch the puppets!"

Amiante turned a brief glance over his shoulder. "Lords or lordlings."

Ghyl searched the audience. No

one resembled Lord Bodbozzle; no one radiated that near-visible effulgence of authority and financial independence which Ghyl imagined must surround all lords. He started to ask his father whom he presumed to be the lord, then stopped, knowing that Amiante's only response would be a disinterested shrug. Ghyl looked along the rows, face by face. How could lord or lordling not resent the crude caricature of Lord Bodbozzle? But no one seemed perturbed . . . Ghyl lost interest in the matter; perhaps the Garrion visited the pageant by their own inclination.

The intermission was to be ten minutes; Ghyl slipped from his seat, went to examine the stage at closer vantage. To the side hung a canvas flap; Ghyl pulled it open, looked into a side-room, where a small man in brown velvet sat sipping a cup of tea. Ghyl glanced over his shoulder; Amiante, preoccupied with his own inner visions, paid no heed. Ghyl ducked under the canvas, stood hesitantly, prepared to leap back should the man in brown velvet come to seize him, for somehow Ghyl had come to suspect that the puppets were stolen children, whipped until they acted and danced with exact precision: an idea investing the performance with a horrid fascination. But the man in brown velvet, apart from a civil nod, seemed uninterested in capturing Ghyl. Emboldened, Ghyl came a few steps forward. "Are you the puppet-master?"

"That I am, lad: Holkerwoyd the puppet-master, enjoying a brief respite from my labors."

The man was rather old and gnarled. He did not appear the sort who would torment and whip children. With added confidence Ghyl—not knowing precisely what he meant—asked: “You’re—*real*?”

Holkerwoyd did not seem to find the question unreasonable. “I’m as real as necessary, lad, at least to myself. There have been some who have found me, shall we say, evanescent, even evaporative.”

Ghyl understood the general essence of the response. “You must travel to many places.”

“There’s truth indeed. Up and down the great North Continent, over the Bight to Salula, down the peninsula to Wantanua. All this on Halma alone.”

“I’ve never been from Ambroy.”

“You’re young yet.”

“Yes; someday I want to be financially independent, and travel space. Have you visited other worlds?”

“Dozens. I was born beside a star so far that you’ll never see its light, not in the sky of Halma.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I often ask myself the same. The answer always comes: because I’m not somewhere else. Which is a statement more sensible than it sounds. And isn’t it a marvel? Here am I and here are you; think of it! When you ponder the breadth of the galaxy, you must recognize a coincidence of great singularity!”

“I don’t understand.”

“Simple enough! Suppose you were here and I elsewhere, or I were here and you elsewhere, or both of us were elsewhere: three cases vastly more probable than the fourth, which is the fact of our

mutual presence within ten feet of each other. I repeat, a miraculous concatenation! And to think that some hold the Age of Wonders to be past and gone!”

Ghyl nodded dubiously. “That story about Lord Bodbozzle—I’m not so sure I liked it.”

“Eh?” Holkerwoyd blew his cheeks. “And why not?”

“It wasn’t true.”

“Aha then. In what particular?”

Ghyl searched his vocabulary to express what was hardly so much as an intuition. He said, rather lamely, “A man can’t fight ten Gar-
rion. Everyone knows that.”

“Well, well, well,” said Holkerwoyd, talking aside. “The lad has a literal mind.” Back to Ghyl: “But don’t you wish it were so? Is it not our duty to provide gay tales? When you grow up and learn how much you owe the city, you’ll find ample dullness.”

Ghyl nodded wisely. “I expected the puppets to be smaller. And much more beautiful.”

“Ah, the captious one. The dissatisfaction. Well then! When you are larger, they will seem smaller.”

“They are not stolen children?”

Holkerwoyd’s eyebrows puffed like the tail of a startled cat. “So this is your idea? How could I train children to gambols and artless antics, when they are such skeptics, such fastidious critics, such absolutists?”

Ghyl thought it politic to change the subject. “There is a lord in the audience.”

“Not so, my friend. A little lady. She sits to the left in the second row.”

Ghyl blinked. "How do you know?"

Holkerwoyd made a grand gesture. "You wish to plunder me of all my secrets? Well, lad, know this: masks and masking—and unmasking—these are the skills of my trade. Now hasten back to your father. He wears the mask of leaden patience, to sheathe his soul. Within he shakes with grief. You shall know grief too; I see that you are fey." Holkerwoyd advanced, making ferocious gestures. "Hence! Hup! Hah!"

Ghyl fled back into the hall, resumed his seat. Amiante turned him a brief quizzical glance, which Ghyl avoided. Many aspects of the world were beyond his understanding. Recalling the words of Holkerwoyd he looked across the room. Indeed, there in the second row: a small girl with a placid woman of middle-age. So this was a lady! Ghyl examined her carefully. Pretty and graceful she was beyond question, and Ghyl, in the clarity of his vision, saw also a Difference. Her breath would be tart and perfumed, like verbena or lemon. Her mind moved to unfathomable thoughts, wonderful secrets . . . Ghyl noticed a hauteur, an ease of manner, which somehow was fascinating . . . A challenge . . .

The lights dimmed, the curtains parted, and now began a sad little tale which Ghyl thought might be a message to himself from Holkerwoyd, even though such a possibility seemed remote.

The setting of the story was the puppet theater itself. One of the puppets, conceiving the outside world to be a place of eternal merri-

ment, escaped the theater and went forth to mingle with a group of children. For a period there was antic and song; then the children, tiring of play, went their various ways. The puppet sidled through the streets, observing the city: what a dull place compared to the theater, unreal and factitious though it was! But he was reluctant to return, knowing what awaited him. Hesitating, delaying, he hopped and limped back to the theater, singing a plaintive little commentary. His fellow puppets greeted him with restraint and awe; they too knew what to expect. And indeed at the next performance the traditional drama *Emphyrio* was presented, with the runaway puppet cast as Emphyrio. Now ensued a play within a play, and the tale of Emphyrio ran its course. At the end, Emphyrio, captured by the tyrants, was dragged to Golgotha. Before his execution he attempted to deliver a speech justifying his life, but the tyrants refused to let him speak, and inflicted upon him the final humiliation of futility. A grotesquely large rag was stuffed in Emphyrio's mouth; a shining axe struck off his head and such was the fate of the runaway puppet.

Ghyl noticed that the lord-girl, her companion and the Garrion guards did not stay for the finish. When the lights came on, showing white staring faces throughout the audience, they were gone.

Ghyl and Amiante walked homeward through the dusk, each occupied with his own thoughts. Ghyl spoke. "Father."

"Yes."

"In the story, the runaway puppet who played Emphyrio was executed."

"Yes."

"But the puppet who played the runaway puppet also was executed!"

"I noticed as much."

"Did he run away too?"

Amiante heaved a sigh, shook his head. "I don't know. Perhaps puppets are cheap . . . Incidentally, that is not the true tale of Emphyrio."

"What is the true tale?"

"No one knows."

"Was Emphyrio a real man?"

Amiante considered a moment before replying. Then he said: "Human history has been long. If a man named Emphyrio never existed, there was another man, with a different name, who did."

Ghyl found the remark beyond his intellectual depth. "Where do you think Emphyrio lived? Here in Ambroy?"

"This is a problem," said Amiante with a thoughtful frown, "which some men have tried to solve, without success. There are clues, of course. If I were a different man, if I were once again young, if I had no . . ." His voice dwindled.

They walked in silence. Then Ghyl asked, "What is it to be 'fey'?"

Amiante scrutinized him curiously. "Where did you hear the word?"

"Holkerwoyd the puppet-master said I was fey."

"Ah. I see. Well then. It means that you have about you the air of, let us say, important enterprise. That you shall be remarkable and do remarkable deeds."

Ghyl was fascinated. "And I shall

be financially independent and I shall travel? With you, of course?"

Amiante laid his hand on Ghyl's shoulder. "That remains to be seen."

Chapter 3

Amiante's shop and residence was a tall narrow four-story structure of old black timbers and brown tile facing on Undle Square to the north of the Brueben Precinct. On the ground floor was Amiante's workshop, where he carved wooden screens; on the next floor was the kitchen where Amiante and Ghyl cooked and ate, as well as a side room in which Amiante kept a desultory collection of old manuscripts. On the third floor Amiante and Ghyl slept; and above was a loft full of unusable objects, too old or too remarkable to throw away.

Amiante was the most noncommittal of men: pensive, almost brooding, working in fits of energy, then for hours or days occupying himself with the detail of a sketch, or perhaps doing nothing whatever. He was an expert craftsman: his screens were always First and often Acmes, but his output was not particularly large. Vouchers, therefore, were not plentiful in the Tarvoke household. Clothes, like all the merchandise of Fortinone, were hand-made and dear; Ghyl wore smocks and trousers stitched together by Amiante himself, even though the guilds discouraged such 'fringe encroachment'. Seldom were there coins to be spared for sweets, and none for organized entertainment. Every day the barge *Jaoundi* pushed majestically up the

Inse to the holiday village Bazen, returning after dark. For the children of Ambroy this was the most delightful and hoped-for excursion imaginable. Once or twice Amiante mentioned the *Jaoundi* excursion, but nothing ever came of it.

Ghyl nonetheless considered himself fortunate. Amiante imposed few restraints. Other children no older than himself were already learning a trade: a Guild-school, in a home workshop or that of a relative. The children of scribes, clerks, pedants, or any others who might need advanced reading and writing skills were drilled to second or even third schedule*. Devout parents sent their children to Infant Skips and Juvenile Hops at the Finukan Temple, or taught them simple patterns at home.

Amiante, whether through calculation or perhaps absentmindedness, made no such demands upon Ghyl, who came and went as he pleased. He explored all Brueben Precinct, then, growing bolder, wandered far afield. He explored the docks and boat-building shops

of Nobile Precinct; clambered over hulks of old barges on the Dod-rechten mud-flats, eating raw sea-fruit for his lunch; crossed to Despar Island in the estuary, where there were glass factories and iron-works, and on several occasions continued across the bridge to Breakman's Point.

South of Brueben, toward the heart of old Ambroy, were the precincts most thoroughly demolished in the Empire Wars: Hoge, Cato, Hyalis Park, Vashmont. Snaking over the forlorn landscape were rows and double-rows of houses built of salvaged brick; in Hoge was the Public Market, in Cato, the Temple; elsewhere were vast areas of broken black brick and mouldering concrete, ill-smelling ponds surrounded by slime of peculiar colors, occasionally the shack of a vagabond or noncup*. In Cato and Vashmont stood the gaunt skeletons of the old central towers, preempted by the lords for their eyries. One day Ghyl, recalling Rudel the puppet, decided to test the practicality of the exploit. Selecting a tower, the

*In Fortinone and across the North Continent five schedules or systems of writing were in use:

1. A set of twelve hundred and thirty-one pictograms derived from ancient interplanetary conventions, taught to all children.

2. A cursive version of the pictograms, used by tradesmen and artisans, with perhaps four hundred additional special forms.

3. A syllabary, sometimes used to augment the pictograms, sometimes as a graphic system in its own right.

4. A cursive form of the syllabary, with a large number of logographs: the system used by the lords; by priests, ordained saltants, lay leapers, expositants; by scribes and pedants.

5. An archaic alphabet, with its many variants, used with archaic dialects or for special effects, such as tavern signs, boat names, and the like.

*Noncupatives: non-recipients of welfare benefits, and reputedly all chaoticists, anarchists, thieves, swindlers, whore-mongers.

property of Lord Waldo the Flow-an*, Ghyl started to climb the structure: up the diagonal bracing to the first horizontal girder, across to another diagonal, up to the second horizontal, and the third, and the fourth: up a hundred feet, two hundred feet, three hundred feet, and here he stopped, hugging the girder, for the distance to the ground had become frightening.

For a space Ghyl sat looking out across the old city. The view was splendid, in a still, melancholy fashion; the ruins, lit at an angle by the gray-gold sunlight, showed a fascinating wealth of detail. Ghyl gazed off across Hoge, trying to locate Undle Square . . . From below came a hoarse harsh voice; looking down Ghyl saw a man in brown trousers and flared black coat: one of the Vashmont welfare agents.

Ghyl descended to the ground where he was sternly reprimanded and required to state his name and address.

Early the following morning a Brueben Precinct Welfare Agent, Helfred Cobol, stopped by to have a word with Amiante, and Ghyl became very apprehensive. Would he be rehabilitated? But Helfred Cobol said nothing about the Vashmont tower and only made gruff recommendations that Amiante impose stricter discipline upon Ghyl, which Amiante heard with polite disinterest.

Helfred Cobol was stocky and

barrel-shaped with a pudgy pouchy head, a bump of a nose, small gray eyes. He was brisk and business-like, and reputedly conceded special treatment to no one. Still he was a man of wide experience and tended not to interpret the Code too narrowly. With most recipients Helfred Cobol used a breezy manner, but in the presence of Amiante he was cautious and watchful, as if he found Amiante unpredictable.

Helfred Cobol had hardly departed before Eng Seche, the cantankerous old precinct delegate of the Woodcarvers' Guild came by to inspect the premises, to satisfy himself that Amiante was conforming to the by-laws, using only the prescribed tools and operations, making use of no jigs, patterns, automatic processes or multiple production devices. He remained over an hour, examining Amiante's tools one by one, until finally Amiante, in a somewhat strained voice, inquired precisely what he sought.

"Nothing specific, Rt. Tarvoke**, nothing especial; perhaps the impression of a clamp, or something similar. I may say that your work of late has been peculiarly even of finish."

"If you wish, I can work less skillfully," suggested Amiante.

His irony, if he intended such, was lost on the delegate. "This is counter to the by-laws. Very well then; you are aware of the strictures."

Amiante turned back to his work;

*The lords derived their cognomens from the public utility fiefs, which constituted their primary holdings. These, in the language of the time, were Spay, Chaluz, Flowan, Overtrend, Underline and Boimarc: communications, energy, water, transit, sewerage, trade.

**Rt.: abbreviation for *Recipient*, the usual formal or honorific title of address.

the delegate departed. From the slope of Amiante's shoulders, the energy with which he plied mallet and chisel, Ghyl realized that his father was exasperated. Amiante finally threw down the tools, went to the door, looked across Undle Square. He turned back into the shop. "Do you understand what the delegate was saying?"

"He thought you were duping."

"Yes. Something of the sort. Do you know why he was concerned?"

"No." And Ghyl added loyally, "It seemed silly to me."

"Well—not altogether. In Fortinone we live or die by trade, and we guarantee hand-crafted wares. Duplicating, molding, casting—all are prohibited. We make no two objects alike, and the guild delegates enforce the rule."

"What of the lords?" asked Ghyl. "What guild do they belong to? What do they produce?"

Amiante gave a painful grimace: half-smile, half-wince. "They are folk apart. They belong to no guilds."

"How do they earn their vouchers?" demanded Ghyl.

"Very simply," said Amiante. "Long ago there was a great war. Ambroy was left in ruins. The lords came here and spent many vouchers in reconstruction: a process called investment. They repaired the water supply, laid down the Overtrend tubes, and so forth. So now we pay for use of these facilities."

"Hmhf," said Ghyl. "I thought we received water and power and things like that as part of our free welfare benefits."

"Nothing is free," remarked Amiante. "Unless a person steals, whereupon, sooner or later, in one

way or another, he pays for his stealing. So there you have it. The lords take a part of all our money: 1.18 percent to be exact."

Ghyl reflected a moment. "Is that a great deal?"

"It seems adequate," said Amiante drily. "There are three million recipients in Fortinone and about two hundred lords—six hundred counting ladies and lordlings." Amiante pulled at his lower lip. "It makes an interesting calculation . . . three million recipients, six hundred noble-folk. One noble for each 5000 recipients. On a basis of 1.18 percent—call it one percent—it would appear that each lord receives the income of fifty recipients." Amiante seemed perplexed by the results of his computation. "Even lords must find it hard to spend so lavishly. . . . Well, then, it is not our affair. I give them their percentage and gladly. Although it is indeed somewhat puzzling. . . . Do they throw money away? Give to far charities? When I was correspondent I should have thought to ask."

"What is a 'correspondent'?"

"Nothing of importance. A position which I held a long time ago, when I was young. A time long past, I fear."

"It does not mean being a lord?"

Amiante chuckled. "Certainly not. Do I resemble a lord?"

Ghyl examined him critically. "I suppose not. How does one become a lord?"

"By birth."

"But—what of Rudel and Marelvie at the puppet play? Did they not receive utility fiefs and become lords?"

"Not really. Desperate noncups, and sometimes recipients, have kidnaped lords and forced them to yield fiefs and great sums of money. The kidnapers would be financially independent, they might call themselves lords, but they never dared mingle with the true lords. Finally the lords bought Garrion guards from the Damar puppet-makers; and now there are few kidnappings. Additionally the lords have agreed to pay no more ransom if kidnaped. So a recipient or a noncup can never be a lord, even should he wish to be."

"When Lord Bodbozzle wanted to marry Marelvie, would she have become a lady? Would their children have been lords?"

Amiante put down his tools and carefully considered his answer. "Very often the lords take mistresses—lady-friends—from among the recipients," he said, "but are careful never to breed children. They are a race apart and apparently intend to keep themselves so."

The amber panes of the outside door darkened; it burst open and Helfred Cobol entered the shop. He stood frowning portentously toward Ghyl, whose heart sank into his shoes. Helfred Cobol turned to Amiante. "I have just read my noon briefing sheet. There is a red notation in reference to your son Ghyl: an offense of trespass and careless risk. The apprehension was made by the Ward 12B, Vashmont Precinct, Welfare Agent. He reports that Ghyl had climbed the girders of Lord Waldo the Flowan's tower to a dangerous and illegal height, committing an offense

against Lord Waldo, and against the precincts of Vashmont and Brueben by incurring risk of hospitalization."

Amiante, brushing chips from his apron, blew out his cheeks. "Yes, yes. The lad is quite active."

"Far too active! In fact, irresponsible! He prowls at will, night and day. I have seen him slinking home after dark drenched to the skin with rain! He roams the city like a thief; he learns nothing but shiftlessness! I cannot believe that this is a benign situation. Do you have no concern for the child's future?"

"No hurry there," replied Amiante in an airy tone. "The future is long."

"A man's life is short. High time he was introduced to his calling! I assume you intend him for a wood-carver?"

Amiante shrugged. "As good a trade as any."

"He should be under instruction. Why do you not send him to the Guild school?"

Amiante tested the edge of the chisel against his thumbnail. "Let him enjoy his innocence," he said in a gruff voice. "He will know drudgery enough in his lifetime."

Helfred Cobol started to speak, then stopped. He gave a grunt which might have meant anything. "Another matter: why does he not attend Voluntary Temple Exercises?"

Amiante put down his chisel, frowned rather foolishly, as if he were puzzled. "As to that, I don't know. I have never asked him."

"You teach him leaps at home?"

"Well, no. I do small leaping myself."

"Hmmf. You should enjoin him to

such matters regardless of your own habits."

Amiante turned his eyes toward the ceiling, then picked up his chisel and attacked a panel of aromatic arzack which he had just clamped to his bench. The design was already laid out: a grove of trees with long-haired maidens fleeing a satyr. The apertures and rough differences of relief were indicated by chalk-marks. Using a metal straight-bar as a guide for his thumb, Amiante began to gouge into the wood.

Helfred Cobol came across the room to watch. "Very handsome . . . What is that wood? Kodilla? Boli-gam? One of those South Continent hardwoods?"

"Arzack, from the woods back of Perdue."

"Arzack! I had no idea it gave so large a panel! The trees are never more than three feet through."

"I pick my trees," Amiante explained patiently. "The foresters cut the trunks into seven-foot lengths. I rent a vat at the dye-works. The logs soak in chemical for two years. I remove the bark, make a single two-inch cut up the trunk: about thirty laminae. I peel off the outer two inches entirely around the trunk, to secure a slab seven feet high by six to nine feet long. This goes into a press, and when it dries I scrape it flat."

"Hm. You peel the layer off yourself?"

"Yes."

"With no complaints from the Carpenters' Guild?"

Amiante shrugged. "They can't or won't do the work. I have no choice. Even if I wanted any." The

last was a muttered afterthought.

Helfred Cobol said tersely, "If everyone acted to his own taste we'd live like Wirwans."

"Perhaps." Amiante continued to shave wood from the arzack slab. Helfred Cobol picked up one of the curls, smelled it. "What is the odor: wood or chimal?"

"A little of both. New arzack is rather more peppery."

Helfred Cobol heaved a sigh. "I'd like a screen like that, but my stipend barely keeps me alive. I don't suppose you have any rejects you'd part with."

Amiante glanced expressionlessly sidewise. "Talk to the Boimarc lords. They take all my screens. The Rejects they burn, the Seconds they lock in a warehouse, the Acmes and Firsts they export. Or so I suppose, since I am not consulted. I would earn more vouchers if I did my own marketing."

"We must maintain our reputation," declared Helfred Cobol in a heavy voice. "In the far worlds, to say 'a piece from Ambroy' is to say 'a jewel of perfection'!"

"Admiration is gratifying," said Amiante, "but it gains remarkably few vouchers."

"What would you have? The markets flooded with brummagem?"

"Why not?" asked Amiante, continuing with his work. "Acmes and Firsts would shine by comparison."

Helfred Cobol shook his head in dissent. "Merchandising is not all that simple." He watched a moment or two longer, then laid his finger on the straight-bar. "Better not let the Guild Delegate see you working with a guide device. He'd bring you be-

fore the committee for duping."

Amiante looked up in mild astonishment. "No duplicating here."

Amiante looked up in mild astonishment. "No duplicating here."

"The action of the bar against your thumb allows you to carry along or duplicate a given depth of cut."

"Bah," muttered Amiante. "Pettifoggery. Utter nonsense."

"A friendly warning, no more," said Helfred Cobol. He glanced aside to Ghyl. "Your father's a good craftsman, lad, but perhaps a trifle vague and unworldly. Now my advice to you is to give over this wandering and prowling, by day and by night. Apply yourself to a trade. Wood-carving, or if you want something different, the Guild Council can offer a choice where shortages exist. Myself, I believe you'd do best with wood-carving. Amiante has much to teach you." Helfred Cobol turned the briefest of glances at the straight-bar. "Another matter: you're not too young for the Temple. They'll put you at easy leaps, and teach you proper doctrine. But keep on like you're going, you'll end up a vagrant or a noncup." Helfred Cobol gave Amiante a curt nod and departed the shop.

Ghyl went to the door, watched Helfred Cobol cross Undle Square. Then he slowly closed the door—another slab of dark arzack into which Amiante had set bulbs of crude amber glass—and came slowly across the room. "Do I have to go to the Temple?"

Amiante grunted. "Helfred Cobol is not to be taken altogether seriously. He says certain things because this is his job. I daresay he sends

his own children to Saltation, but I doubt if he leaps any more zealously than I do."

"Why are all Welfare Agents named Cobol?"

Amiante drew up a stool, poured himself a cup of bitter black tea. He sipped thoughtfully. "Long ago, when the capitol of Fortinone was at Thadeus, up the coast, the Welfare Supervisor was a man named Cobol. He appointed all his brothers and nephews to good jobs, so that shortly there were only Cobols in the Welfare Department. So it is today; and welfare agents who are not born Cobols—most of them are, of course—change their names. It is simply a matter of tradition. Ambroy is a city of many traditions. Some are useful, some not. A Mayor of Ambroy is elected every five years, but he has no function; he does nothing but draw his stipend. A tradition, but useless."

Ghyl looked at his father respectfully. "You know almost everything, don't you? No one else knows such things."

Amiante nodded rather glumly. "Such knowledge earns no vouchers, however . . . Ah well, enough of this." He drained his cup of tea. "It seems that I must train you to carve wood, to read and write . . . Come here then. Look at these gouges and chisels. First you must learn their names. This is a plow. This is a No. 2 elliptical gouge. This is a lazy-tang . . ."

Chapter 4

Amiante was not a demanding taskmaster. Ghyl's life proceeded

much as before, though he climbed no more towers.

Summer came to Ambroy. There were rains and great thunderstorms, then a period of beautiful clear weather during which the half-ruined city seemed almost beautiful. Amiante aroused himself from his musing and in a great burst of energy took Ghyl on a walking-trip up the Inse River, into the foothills of the Meagher Mountains. Ghyl had never before been so far from home. In contrast to the dilapidations of Ambroy, the countryside seemed remarkably fresh and open. Tramping along the riverbank under the purple banion trees, they would often pause to gaze wistfully at some especially pleasant situation—an island, shaded under banion and water-willow, with a little house, a dock, a skiff; or perhaps a houseboat moored to the bank, with children swimming in the river, their parents lounging on the deck with mugs of beer. At night they slept on beds of leaves and straw, their fire flickering and glowing to coals. Overhead burned the stars of the galaxy and Amiante pointed out those few he knew: the Mirabilis cluster, Glysson, Heriartes, Cornus, Alode. To Ghyl these were names of sheer magic. "Someday," he told Amiante, "when I am bigger, we'll carve lots of screens and save all our vouchers; then we'll travel: to all those stars, and the Five Jeng Worlds as well!"

"That would be very nice," said Amiante with a grin. "I'd better put more arzak down into chemical so that we'll have sufficient panels."

"Do you think we could buy a space-yacht and travel as we wished?"

Amiante shook his head. "They cost far too much. A hundred thousand vouchers, often more."

"Couldn't we save that much, if we worked very hard?"

"We'd be working and saving all our lives, and still never have enough. Space-yachts are for lords."

They passed Bazen and Grigglesby Corners and Blonnet, then turned aside into the hills. At last, weary and footsore, they returned home, and indeed Amiante spent precious vouchers to ride Overtrend the last twenty miles through Riverside Park, Vashmont, and Hoge.

For a period Amiante, as if himself convinced of the soundness of Ghyl's proposals, worked with great diligence. Ghyl helped as best he could and practiced the use of chi-sels and augurs, but vouchers came in with discouraging slowness. Amiante's diligence waned; he resumed his old habits of working and musing, staring into space for minutes at a time; and presently Ghyl lost interest as well. There must be some other, faster, system by which to earn vouchers: gambling, for instance. Kidnaping of lords was irregular; Ghyl knew that his father would never hear of such a proposal.

The summer proceeded: a halcyon time, perhaps the happiest of Ghyl's life. In all the city, his favorite resort was Dunkum's Heights in Veige Precinct, north of Brueben, a grassy-topped shoulder of ground beside the estuary. Dozens of fresh mornings and as many hazy afternoons Ghyl climbed Dunkum's Heights, sometimes alone, sometimes with his friend Floriel, a big-eyed waif

with pale skin, fragile features, a mop of thick black hair. Floriel lived with his mother, who worked in the brewery, sectioning and cleaning big purple hollips, from which the brew derived its characteristic musty flavor. She was a large ribald woman, not without vanity, who claimed to be second cousin to the Mayor. Hollip odor permeated Floriel's mother, her person and all her belongings, and even attached itself to Floriel, and ever after, whenever Ghyl drank beer, or caught the tart musk of hollips at the market he would recall Floriel and his wan ragamuffin face.

Floriel was a companion exactly suited to Ghyl's tastes: a lad mild and acquiescent, but by no means lacking in energy or imagination, and ripe for any adventure. The two boys spent many happy hours on Dunkum's Heights, basking in the tawny sunlight, chewing the soft grass, watching the flight of shrinken-birds over the mud-flats.

Dunkum's Heights was a place to laze and dream; in contrast, the space-port, in Godero Precinct, east of Dunkum's Heights, was the very node of adventure and romance. The space-port was divided into three sections, with the depot at the center. To the north was the commercial field, where two or three freight ships were usually loading or discharging. To the south, lined up along an access avenue, were space-yachts belonging to the lords: objects of the most entrancing verve and glitter. To the west was the passenger terminus. Here hulked the black excursion ships, serving those recipients who, by dint of toil

and frugality, had been able to buy off-world passage. The tours were various. Cheapest and most popular was a five-day visit to the moon Damar, a strange little world half the diameter of Halma where lived the Damaran puppet-makers. At Garwan, on Damar's equator, was a tourist node, with hotels, promenades, restaurants. Puppet plays of every description were presented: legends of Faerie, fables of gothic horror, historical reenactments, farces, displays macabre and erotic. The performing puppets were small human simulacra, far more carefully bred, far more expensive than the wry little creatures exported to such enterprises as Framtree's Peripatetic Entercationers. The Damarans themselves lived underground, in circumstances of great luxury. Their pelts were black; their bony little heads were tufted with coarse black bristles; their eyes shone with curious glints, like the lights of a star sapphire: in short, they were not unlike their own export puppets.

Another tourist destination, somewhat more prestigious, was the planet next out in orbit: Morgan, a world of wind-swept oceans, table-flat steppes, pinnacles of naked rock. On Morgan were a number of rather shabby resorts, offering little recreation other than sailing high-wheeled cars across the steppes. Nonetheless, thousands paid hard-won vouchers to spend two weeks at Tundra Inn or Mountain House or Cape Rage Haven.

Far more desirable were the Wonder Worlds of the Mirabilis Cluster. When folk returned from the Wonder Worlds they had fulfilled their

stems and talking largely of the future. "What, really, do you think you'll do?" asued Ghyl.

"First of all," said Floriel, cradling his girlishly delicate face in his hands, "I'll hoard vouchers: dozens. Then I'll learn to gamble, like the noncups do. I'll learn all the best ways to win and then one day I'll gamble and earn hundreds and hundreds of vouchers. Thousands even. Then I'll turn in for a space-yacht and fly away! away! away! Out past Mirabilis!"

Ghyl nodded reflectively. "That would be one way."

"Or," Floriel went on, "I might save a lord's daughter from danger. Then I'd marry her and be a lord myself."

Ghyl shook his head. "That's never done. They're much too proud. They just have friends among the under-folk. Mistresses, they're called."

Floriel turned to look south, across the brown and gray crumble of Brueben to the towers of Vashmont. "Why should they be proud? They are only ordinary people who happen to be lords."

"A different kind of people," said Ghyl. "Although I've heard that when they walk the streets without Garrion no one notices them as lords."

"They're proud because they are rich" declared Floriel. "I'll earn wealth too, and I'll be proud and they'll be eager to marry me, just to count my vouchers. Think of it! Blue vouchers, orange vouchers, green vouchers! Bundles and boxes of all colors!"

"You'll need them all," observed Ghyl. "Space-yachts cost a great

dreams; they had traveled to the stars; they would talk of the marvels they had seen to the end of their time. The excursion however was beyond the financial reach of all but the highly compensated: guild-masters and delegates, welfare supervisors, Boimarc auditors and bursars, those noncups who had gained wealth through mercantilism, gambling or crime.

Worlds more remote than the Wonder Worlds were known to exist: Rodion, Alcantara, Earth, Maastricht, Montiserra with its floating cities, Himat, many others, but no one fared so far save the lords in their space-yachts.

To Ghyl and Floriel nothing was impossible. Noses pressed to the fence which surrounded the space-port, they vowed that financial independence and space-travel was the only life for them. But first to gain the vouchers, and here was the stumbling block. Vouchers were hard to come by, Ghyl well knew. Other worlds were reputedly rich, with vouchers distributed without stint. How to take himself and his father and Floriel to a more lavish environment? If only by some marvelous exploit, by some miracle he could come into possession of a space-yacht! What freedom, what romance and adventure!

Ghyl recalled the exactions imposed upon evil Lord Bodbozzle. Rudel and Marelvie had gained financial independence—but it had only been a puppet-play. Was there no other way?

One amazing day toward the end of summer Ghyl and Floriel lay on Dunkum's Heights sucking grass

deal: a half-million vouchers, I suppose. A million for the really good ones: the Lixons or the Hexanders with the promenade deck. Just pretend! Fancy that we're out in space, with *Mirabilis* behind, heading for some wonderful strange planet. We dine in the main saloon, on turbot and roast bloorcock and the best Gade wine—and then we go along the promenade to the after-dome and eat our ices in the dark, with the *Mirabilis* stars behind and the Giant's Scimitar above and the galaxy to the side."

Floriel heaved a deep sigh. "If I can't buy a space-yacht—I'll steal one. I don't think it's wrong," he told Ghyl earnestly, for Ghyl wore a dubious expression. "I'd steal only from the lords, who can well afford to lose. Think of the bales of vouchers they receive and never spend!"

Ghyl was not sure that this was the case, but did not care to argue.

Floriel rose to his knees. "Let's go over to the space-port! We can look at yachts and pick one out!"

"Now?"

"Of course! Why not?"

"But it so far."

"We'll use Overtrend."

"My father doesn't like to give vouchers to the lords."

"Overtrend doesn't cost much. To Godero, no more than fifteen checks."

Ghyl shrugged. "Very well."

They went down from the bluff by the familiar train, but instead of turning south, skirted the municipal tanneries to the Veige No. 2 West Overtrend kiosk. They descended by escalator to the on ramp, boarded a capsule. Each in turn punched the 'Space-port' symbol and held his

under-age card to a sensor plate. The capsule accelerated, rushed east, decelerated, opened; the boys stepped forth upon the up-escalator, which presently discharged them into the space-port depot: a cavernous place, echoing to every footfall. The boys slunk over to the side and took stock of the situation, conversing in low voices. For all the comings and goings, the atmosphere of suppressed excitement, the depot was a cheerless place, with walls of dust-brown tile, a great dim vault of a roof.

Ghyl and Floriel decided to watch the passengers boarding the excursion ships. They approached the embarkation wicket, tried to pass through the field gate but a guard waved them back. "Observation deck through the arch; passengers only on the field!" But he turned away to answer a question and Floriel, suddenly bold, seized Ghyl's arm, and they slipped quickly past.

Amazed and delighted at their own audacity, they hurried to the shadow of an overhanging buttress where they crouched to take stock of the situation. A sound from the sky startled them: a sudden high-pitched roar from a Leamas Line excursion ship, settling like a great portly duck on its suppressors. The roar became a whine as the force-field reacted with the ground, then passed beyond audibility. The ship touched ground; the hyper-audible sound returned into sensible range, then sighed away to silence, and the ship was at rest.

The ports opened; the passengers slowly filed forth, vouchers spent, heads bowed, ambitions satiated.

Floriel gave a sudden gasp of excitement. He pointed. "The ports are open! Do you know, if we went through the crowd right now we could go aboard and hide? Then when the ship was in space we'd come out! They'd never send us back! We'd see Damar at least and maybe Morgan as well."

Ghyl shook his head. "We wouldn't see anything. They'd lock us in a little room and give us bread and water. They'd charge our fathers for the passage—thousands of vouchers! My father couldn't pay. I don't know what he'd do."

"My mother wouldn't pay," said Floriel. "She'd beat me as well. But I don't care. We'd have traveled *space!*"

"They'd list us for inclination," said Ghyl.

Floriel made a gesture of scornful defiance. "What's the difference? We could toe the line in the future—until another opportunity like this came along."

"It's no opportunity," said Ghyl. "Not really. In the first place they'd catch us in the act and pitch us out. We'd do ourselves no good whatever. Anyway, who wants to travel in an old excursion ship? I want a space-yacht. Let's see if we can get out on the south field."

The space-yachts were ranked in a line along the far end of the field, with an access avenue running in front of them. To reach this avenue meant crossing an open area where they would be in plain view of anyone who cared to look down either from the observation deck or the control tower. Ghyl and Floriel, huddling beside the wall, discussed the

situation, weighing pros and cons. "Come," said Floriel. "Let's just make a run for it."

"We'd do better just walking," said Ghyl. "We wouldn't look so much like thieves. Which we're not, of course. Then, if we were caught, we could say truthfully that we meant no harm. If they saw us running, they'd be sure that we were up to mischief."

"Very well," grumbled Floriel. "Let's go then."

Feeling naked and exposed they crossed the open area, and gained the comparative shelter of the access avenue without challenge. And now, near at hand, were the fascinating space-yachts; the first, a hundred-foot Dameron CoCo 14, jutting its prow almost over their heads.

They peered cautiously down the avenue, which was the way the lords came when they wished to embark upon their yachts. All seemed placid, the marvellous yachts crouched on rolling gear and nose-blocks as if dozing.

No Garrion were in sight, nor any lords, nor any mechanics—these latter generally men from Luschein on South Continent. Floriel's daring, drawn more from an active mind and a high-strung temperament than any real courage, began to peter out. He became timid and fretful, while Ghyl, who would never have come so far on his own, was obliged to supply staying-power for both.

"Do you think we should go any farther?" Floriel asked in a husky whisper.

"We've come this far," said Ghyl. "We're doing no harm. I don't think

anyone would mind. Not even a lord."

"What would they do if they caught us? Send us to Rehabilitation?"

Ghyl laughed nervously. "Of course not. If anyone asks, we'll say we're just looking at the yachts, which is the truth."

"Yes," said Floriel, dubiously. "I suppose so."

"Come along then," said Ghyl.

They started south along the avenue. After the Dameron was a Wodze Blue, and next beside it a slightly smaller, more lavish, Wodze Scarlet; then a huge Gallypool Irwan-forth; then a Hatz Marauder, then a Sparling Starchaser in a splendid hull of gold and silver: yacht after yacht, each more wonderful than the last. Once or twice the boys walked up under the hulls, to touch the glossy skins which had known so much distance, to examine the port-of-call blazons.

Halfway along the avenue they came upon a yacht which had been lowered off its nose-block, apparently to facilitate repair, and the boys walked furtively close. "Look!" whispered Ghyl. "You can see just a bit of the main saloon. Isn't she absolutely wonderful?"

Floriel acknowledged as much. "It's a Lixon Triplane. They all have those heavy cowls around the forward ports." He walked up under the hull to examine the port-of-call blazons. "This one's been everywhere. Triptolemus . . . Jeng . . . San-reale . . . Someday, when I read I'll know them all."

"Yes, I want to read too," said Ghyl. "My father knows a great deal about reading; he can teach

me." He stared at Floriel who was making urgent gestures. "What's the matter?"

"Garrison!" hissed Floriel. "Hide, back of the stanchion!"

With alacrity Ghyl joined Floriel behind the prow support. They stood scarcely breathing. Floriel whispered desperately, "They can't do anything to us, even if they catch us. They're just servants; they don't have a right to give us orders, or chase us, or anything. Not unless we're doing damage."

"I suppose not," said Ghyl. "Let's hide anyway."

"Certainly."

The Garrison came past, moving with the rolling purposeful step characteristic of the race. He wore livery of light green and gray, with gold rosettes, a cap of green-gray leather.

Floriel, who took pride in his knowledgeability, hazarded a guess regarding the Garrison's patron: "Green and gray . . . Might be Verth the Chaluz. Or Herman the Chaluz. Chaluz lords use the gold rosette, you know: it means power."

Ghyl did not know, but he nodded acquiescence. They waited until the Garrison entered the terminal and was gone from sight. Cautiously the boys came out from behind the stanchion. They looked left and right, then proceeded along the line of yachts. "Look!" breathed Floriel. "The Deme—the gold and black one! The port is open!"

The two boys halted, stared at the fascinating gap. That's where the Garrison came from," said Ghyl. "He'll be back."

"Not right away. We could climb

the ramp and look inside. No one would ever know."

Ghyl gave a grimace. "I've already been reprimanded for trespass."

"This isn't trespass! Anyway, what's the harm? If anyone asked what we were doing, we'd say we were just looking."

"There's sure to be someone aboard," said Ghyl dubiously.

Floriel thought not. "The Garrion is probably fixing something, or cleaning. He's gone to get supplies and he'll be away ever so long! Let's take a quick look inside!"

Ghyl gauged the distance to the terminal: a good five minute's walk. Floriel tugged at his arm. "Come along; as if we were lordlets! One peek inside, to see how the lords live!"

Ghyl thought of Helfred Cobol; he thought of his father. His throat felt dry. Already he and Floriel had dared more than was proper . . . Still, the Garrion was in the terminal, and what could be the harm in looking through the entrance? Ghyl said, "If we just go to the door. . . ."

Floriel now became reluctant; evidently he had been counting on Ghyl to veto so mad a proposal. "Do you really think we should?"

Ghyl made a signal for caution and went quietly toward the space-yacht. Floriel followed.

At the foot of the ramp they stopped to listen. There was no sound from within. Visible only was the inside of the air-lock and, beyond, a tantalizing glimpse of carved wood, scarlet cloth, a rack of glass and metal implements: luxury almost too splendid to be real. Drawn by fascinated curiosity, almost against their wills, certainly against their

better judgment, the boys gingerly ascended the ramp, furtive as cats in a strange house. They peered in through the port, to hear a murmur of machinery, nothing else.

Now they backed away to look toward the terminal. The Garrion had not come forth. Hearts thumping in their throats the boys stepped into the air-lock, peered into the main saloon.

They let out their breath slowly in delight and wonder. The saloon was perhaps thirty feet long and sixteen feet wide. The walls were paneled in gray-green sako-wood and tapestry cloth, the floor was covered with a thick purple rug. At the forward end of the saloon four steps rose to a control platform. Aft an arch opened upon an observation deck under a transparent dome.

"Isn't it marvelous?" breathed Floriel. "Do you think we'll ever have a space-yacht? One as fine as this?"

"I don't know," said Ghyl somberly. "I hope so . . . Yes. Some day I will have one . . . Now we had best go."

Floriel whispered. "Think! If we knew astrogation, we could take the space-yacht right now—up and away from Ambroy! We'd own it, all to ourselves!"

The idea was tantalizing but preposterous. Ghyl was now more than ready to leave, but to his dismay Floriel skipped recklessly across the saloon, up the steps to the control platform. Ghyl called to him in an anxious voice, "Don't touch anything! Don't move a single lever!"

"Come now. Do you take me for a fool?"

Ghyl looked longingly back at the entrance port. "We'd best be going!"

"Oh but you must come up here, you can't imagine how grand it is!"

"Don't touch anything!" Ghyl warned him. "You'll cause trouble!" He came a couple steps forward. "Let's go!"

"As soon as I—" Floriel's voice became a startled stammer.

Following the direction of his gaze, Ghyl saw a girl standing by the aft companionway. She wore a rich suit of rose velvet, a square soft flat cap of the same material with a pair of scarlet ribbons hanging past her shoulders. She was dark-haired; her face was piquant, mobile, bright with vitality, but at this moment she looked from one ragamuffin to the other in outrage. Ghyl stared back in fascination. Surely this was the same small lady the puppet-master had pointed out at the puppet show? She was very pretty, he thought, with the same fascinating hint of Difference: that peculiar quality which distinguished lords from men.

Floriel, arousing from his petrifaction, began to slink down from the control deck. The girl came a few steps forward. A Garrion followed her into the saloon. Floriel froze back against a bulkhead. He stuttered, "We meant no harm, we only wanted to look—"

The girl studied him gravely, then turned to inspect Ghyl. Her mouth drooped in disgust. She looked back at the Garrion. "Give them a beating; throw them away."

The Garrion seized Floriel, who chattered and howled. Ghyl might have retreated and escaped, but he chose to remain, for a reason not at

all clear to him: certainly his presence was no help to Floriel.

The Garrion dealt Floriel a series of disinterested blows. Floriel yelped and writhed in dramatic fashion. The girl gave a curt nod. "Enough; the other."

Sobbing and panting Floriel fled past Ghyl, and down the ramp. Ghyl stood his ground against the Garrion, trying to control his shrinking flesh as the creature loomed over him. The Garrion's hands were cool and rough; the touch sent an odd chill along Ghyl's nerves. He hardly felt the blows, which were carefully measured. His attention was fixed on the girl who watched the beating critically. Ghyl wondered how someone so delicate and pretty could be so unfeeling. Were all the lords so cruel?

The girl saw Ghyl's gaze and perhaps sensed the import. She frowned. "Beat this one more severely; he is insolent!"

Ghyl received a few additional blows and then was shoved roughly from the ship.

Floriel stood a fearful fifty yards down the avenue. Ghyl picked himself up from the ground where he had fallen. He looked back up the ramp. There was nothing to see. He turned away and joined Floriel; wordlessly they trudged back along the avenue.

They gained the interior of the depot without attracting attention. Mindful of his father's antipathy toward the Overtrend, Ghyl insisted on walking home: a matter of four miles.

Along the way Floriel burst out in a spasm of fury. "What abomin-

able people the lords! Did you sense the girl's glee? She treated us as if we were muck! As if we stank! And my mother is second cousin to the Mayor! I will have my own back some day! Hear me, for I am resolved!"

Ghyl heaved a mournful sigh. "She certainly could have used us more kindly. Still—she also might have used us worse. Far worse."

Floriel gazed at him in amazement, hair tousled, face distorted. "Eh? What's all this? She ordered us beaten! While she watched smirking!"

"She could have had our names. What if she had given us to the welfare agents?"

Floriel lowered his head. The two boys trudged on into Brueben. The setting sun, entering a band of ale-colored haze, cast amber light in their faces.

Chapter 5

Autumn came to Ambroy, then winter: a season of chilling rains and mists, which started a black and lavender lichen growing over the ruins, to lend the old city a dismal grandeur it lacked in the dry season. Amiante completed a fine screen which was judged 'Acme' and which also received a Guild Citation of Excellence, with which he was quietly pleased.

He also received a visit from a Guide Leaper of the Temple, a sharp-featured young man wearing a scarlet jacket, a tall black hat, brown breeches tight around heavy legs, knotted with muscle after a lifetime

of leaping. He came to remonstrate in regard to Ghyl's carefree life. "Why does he not participate in Soul Endowment? What of his Basic Saltations? He knows neither Rite nor Rote nor Doxology; nor Leaps nor Bounds! Finuka requires more than this!"

Amiante listened politely, but continued to work with his chisel. He spoke in a mild voice, "The lad is hardly old enough to think. If he has a mind to devotion, he'll know fast enough; then he'll more than make up for any lack."

The Leaper became excited. "A fallacy! Children are best trained young. Witness myself! When I was an infant, I crawled upon a patterned rug! The first words I spoke were the Apotheosis and the Simulations. This is best! Train the child young! As he stands now he is a spiritual vacuum, susceptible to any strange cult! Best to fill his soul with the way of Finuka!"

"I'll explain all this to him," said Amiante. "Perhaps he may be encouraged to worship; who can say?"

"The parent bears the responsibility," intoned the Guide Leaper. "When have you done your last leaping? I suspect months have passed!"

Amiante calculated a pensive moment. He nodded. "Months at the very least."

"Well then!" exclaimed the Leaper in triumph. "Is this not an explanation in itself?"

"Very likely. Well then, I'll have a discussion with the boy later in the day."

The Guide Leaper started to expostulate further, but, observing Amiante's absorption in his work, he

shook his head in defeat, performed a holy sign and departed.

Amiante glanced up expressionlessly as the Leaper passed through the door.

Time and welfare regulations pressed in upon Ghyl. On his tenth birthday he joined the Woodcarvers' Guild, his first choice, the Mariners' Guild, being closed to all save sons of existing members.

Amiante dressed for the occasion in formal Guild-meeting wear: a brown coat flared wide at the hips, peaked up at the shoulders, with black piping and carved buttons; tight trousers, with rows of white buttons down the sides; a complicated billed hat of tan felt with black tassels and guild medals. Ghyl wore his first trousers (having heretofore gone only in a gray child's smock) with a maroon jacket and a smart polished leather cap. Together they walked north to the Guild Hall.

The initiation was a lengthy affair, consisting of many rituals, questions and responses, charges and assurances. Ghyl paid his first year's dues, received his first medal, which the Guild-master ceremoniously affixed to his cap.

From the Guild Hall Ghyl and Amiante walked east across the old Mercantilikum to the Welfare Agency in East Town. Here there was further formality. Ghyl was somatyped; his Beneficial Number was tattooed upon his right shoulder. Henceforth, by agency reckoning, he was an adult, and would be counseled by Helfred Cobol in his own right. Ghyl was asked his status at the Temple, and was forced to admit

to none. The Qualification Officer and the Department Scrivener looked with raised eyebrows from Ghyl to Amiante, then they shrugged. The scrivener wrote upon the questionnaire: "No present capability; status of parent in doubt."

The Qualification Officer spoke in a measured voice: "To achieve your most complete fulfillment as a participating member of society, you must be active at the Temple. I will therefore assign you to Full Operative Function. You must contribute four hours voluntary cooperation per week to the Temple, together with various assessments and beneficial gifts. Since you are somewhat—in fact, considerably—retarded, you will be enrolled in a special Indoctrination Class . . . did you speak?"

"I was asking if the Temple was necessary," stammered Ghyl. "I just wanted to know—"

"Temple instruction is not 'fully compulsory'," said the officer. "It is of the 'Strongly Recommended' category, inasmuch as any other course suggests noncuperativity. You will therefore report to the Temple Juvenile Authority at ten o'clock tomorrow."

So, willy-nilly, and with Amiante keeping his own counsel, Ghyl presented himself at the Central Temple in Cato Precinct. The clerk issued him a dull red cloak with high hitches for leaping, a book which displayed and explained the Great Design, charts of uncomplicated patterns; then assigned him to a study group.

Ghyl made but fair progress at the Temple, and was far outshone

by others younger than himself, who skipped easily through the most complicated patterns: bounding, dancing, whirling, flicking a toe to touch a sign here, an emblem there, swinging contemptuously wide over the black and green 'Delinquencies', coursing swiftly down the peripheries, veering past the red demon spots.

At home Amiante in a sudden fit of energy taught Ghyl to read and write the third level syllabary, and sent him to the Guild instruction chambers to learn mathematics.

It was a busy year for Ghyl. The old days of idleness and wandering seemed remote indeed. On his eleventh birthday Amiante gave him a choice panel of arzack, to be carved into a screen of his own design.

Ghyl looked among his sketches and chose a pleasant composition of boys climbing fruit trees, and he adapted the composition to the natural grain of the panel.

Amiante approved the design. "Quite suitable: whimsical and gay. It is best to produce gay designs. Happiness is fugitive; dissatisfaction and boredom are real. The folk who gaze upon your screens are entitled to all the joy you can give them, even though the joy be but an abstraction."

Ghyl felt impelled to protest at the cynicism of his father. "I don't consider happiness an illusion! Why should folk content themselves with illusion when reality is so pungent? Are not acts better than dreams?"

Amiante gave his characteristic shrug. "There are many more excellent dreams than meaningful acts. Or so it might be argued."

"But acts are *real*! Each real act is worth a thousand dreams!"

Amiante smiled ruefully. "Dream? Act? Which is illusion? Fortinone is old. Billions of folk have come and gone, pale fish in an ocean of time. They rise into the sunlit shallows; they glitter a moment or two; they drift away through the murk."

Ghyl scowled off through the amber panes, which allowed a distorted view of the comings and goings in Undle Square. "I can't feel like a fish. You're not a fish. We don't live in an ocean. You are you and I am I and this is our home." He threw down his tools and marched outside to draw a breath of air. He walked north into Veige Precinct and by force of habit mounted Dunkum's Heights. Here to his annoyance, he found two small boys and a little girl, perhaps seven or eight years old. They were sitting in the grass tossing pebbles down the slope. Their chatter seemed much too boisterous for the spot where Ghyl had spent so much time musing. He gave them a glare of outrage, to which they returned puzzled stares. Ghyl strode off to the north, down the long descending ridge which died upon the Dodrechten mud flats. As he walked, he wondered about Floriel, whom he had not seen for some time. Floriel had joined the Metal-benders' Guild. When Ghyl had seen him last, Floriel had sported a little black leather skull-cap from under which his hair curled out in a manner almost too charming for a boy. Floriel had been somewhat remote. He had finally, so Ghyl decided, been caught up in a sensible career, for all the wild talk of his childhood.

Ghyl returned home during the late afternoon, to find Amiante sorting through a portfolio of his private treasures, which he generally kept in a cabinet on the third floor.

Ghyl had never seen at close hand the contents of the portfolio. He approached and watched over Amiante's elbow as Amiante pored over the objects, which were old writings: manuscript, calligraph, ornaments and illustrations. Ghyl noted several extremely ancient fragments of parchment on which were characters indited with great regularity and uniformity. Ghyl was puzzled. He squinted down at the archaic documents. "Who could write so careful and minute a hand? Did they employ mites? No scrivener to-day could do so well!"

"What you see is a process called 'printing'," Amiante told him. "It is duplication a hundred times, a thousand times over. Nowadays, of course, printing is not allowed."

"How is it accomplished?"

"There are many systems, or so I understand. Sometimes carved bits of metal are inked and pressed against paper; sometimes a jet of black light instantaneously sprays a page with writing; sometimes the characters are burnt upon paper through a pattern. I know very little about these processes, which I believe are still used on other worlds."

Ghyl studied the archaic symbols for a period, then went on to admire the rich colors of the decorations. Amiante, reading from a little pamphlet, chuckled quietly. Ghyl looked around curiously. "What does it say?"

"Nothing of consequence. It is an old bulletin describing an electric

boat which was offered for sale by the Bidderbasse Factory in Luschein. The price: twelve hundred sequins."

"What is a sequin?"

"It is money. Something like welfare vouchers. I don't believe the factory is in operation any more. Perhaps the boats were of poor quality. Perhaps the Overtrend lords laid an embargo. It is difficult to know; there are no dependable chronicles, at least not in Ambroy." Amiante heaved a sad sigh. "One can never learn anything when he so desires . . . Still, I suppose that we should count our blessings . . . Other eras have been far worse. There is no want in Fortinone, as there is in Bauredel. No wealth, of course, except for that of the lords. But no want."

Ghyl examined the printed characters. "Are these hard to read?"

"Not particularly. Would you like to learn?"

Ghyl hesitated, considering the many demands upon his time. If he were ever to travel to Damar, to Morgan, to the Wonder Worlds (already the dream of owning a space-yacht was becoming remote) he must work with great industry, and earn vouchers. But he nodded. "Yes, I would like to learn."

Amiante seemed pleased. "I am not overly well-versed, and there are many idioms which I fail to recognize—but perhaps we can puzzle them out together."

Amiante pushed all his tools to the side, spread a cloth over the screen upon which he had been working, arranged the fragments, brought stylus and paper and copied the crabbed old characters.

During the days which followed

Ghyl struggled to master the archaic system of writing—not so simple a matter as he had originally supposed. Amiante could not transliterate the symbols into either primary pictographs, secondary cursive, nor even the third level syllabary. And even after Ghyl could identify and combine the characters, he was forced to learn archaic idioms and constructions, and sometimes allusions regarding which Amiante could provide no enlightenment.

One day Helfred Cobol came to the shop to find Ghyl copying from an old parchment, while Amiante mused and dreamed over his portfolio. Helfred Cobol stood in the doorway, arms akimbo, a sour look on his face. "Now what occurs here in the wood-carving shop of old Rt. Tarvoke and young Rt. Tarvoke? Are you turning to scrivening? Don't tell me you evoke new patterns for your screens; I know better." He came forward, inspected Ghyl's exercises. "Archaic, eh? Now what will a wood-carver need with Archaic? I can't read it, and I'm a welfare agent."

Amiante spoke with a trifle more animation than he was accustomed to show. "You must remember that one does not carve wood every hour of the day and night."

"Understood," responded Helfred Cobol. "In fact, judging from the work performed since my previous call, you have carved wood very few hours of either day or night. Much more of this and you will be existing on Base Stipend."

Amiante glanced at his nearly finished screen, as if to appraise how much work remained. "In due course, in due course."

Helfred Cobol, coming around the heavy old table, looked down at the portfolio. Amiante made a small motion as if to fold up the covers, but restrained himself. Such an act would only stimulate a man trained to curiosity and suspicion.

Helfred Cobol did not touch the portfolio, but leaned over it with hands behind his back. "Interesting old stuff." He pointed "Printed material, I believe. How old do you reckon it?"

"I can't be sure," said Amiante. "It makes reference to Clarence To-vanesko, so it won't be more than thirteen hundred years old."

Helfred Cobol nodded. "It might even be of local fabrication. When did anti-duping regulations go into effect?"

"About fifty years after this." Amiante nodded at the bit of paper. "Just a guess of course."

"One doesn't see much printing," ruminated Helfred Cobol. "There's not even any contraband off the space-ships, as there used to be in my grandfather's day. Folk seem to be more law-abiding, which, of course, makes life easier for the welfare agents. Non-cups are more active this year, worse luck: vandals, thieves, anarchists that they are."

"A worthless group, by and large," agreed Amiante.

"By and large?" snorted Helfred Cobol. "Altogether, I would say! They are non-productive, a tumor in the society! The criminals suck our blood, the small-dealers disrupt the agency's book-work."

Amiante had no more to say. Helfred Cobol turned to Ghyl. "Put aside the erudite uselessness, boy; that's my best advice. You'll never gain

vouchers as a scrivener. Also, I've been told that your Temple attendance is spotty, that you're only leaping a simple Honor-to-Finuka Half-about. More practice there, young Rt. Tarvoke! And more time with chisel and gouge!"

"Yes sir," said Ghyl meekly. "I'll do my best."

Helfred Cobol gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder and left the shop. Amiante returned to the port-folio. But his mood was broken, and he twitched the papers with quick petulant jerks.

Ghyl heard him mutter a peevish curse, and, looking up, saw that in his annoyance Amiante had torn one of his treasures: a long fragile sheet of low-grade paper printed with wonderful caricatures of three now-forgotten public figures.

Amiante, after his outburst, sat like a rock, brooding over some matter which he obviously did not plan to communicate to Ghyl. Presently, without a word, Amiante rose to his feet, slung his second-best brown and blue cape around his shoulders and set forth upon an errand. Ghyl went to the door, watched his father amble across the square and disappear into an alley which led away into Nobile Precinct and the rough dock area.

Ghyl, also restless, could concentrate no longer on the old writing. He made a half-hearted attempt to master a rather difficult Temple exercise, then set to work on his screen, and so occupied himself the remainder of the day.

The sun had fallen behind the buildings across the square before

Amiante returned. He carried several parcels which he put without comment into a cabinet, then sent Ghyl out to buy seaweed curd and a leek salad for their supper. Ghyl went slowly and reluctantly; there was a pot of left-over porridge which Amiante, who was somewhat frugal with food expenditures, had been planning to use. Why the unnecessary expenditure? Ghyl knew better than to ask. At best Amiante would pretend not to have heard the question.

Something peculiar was in the wind, thought Ghyl. In a heavy mood he visited the greengrocer's, then the marine paste dealer's. Over the evening meal Amiante, to anyone other than Ghyl, might have seemed his ordinary self. Ghyl knew differently. Amiante, not a talkative man, alternated periods of staring glumly down at his plate with attempts at contriving an easy conversation. He inquired as to Ghyl's progress at the Temple, a subject regarding which he had heretofore shown little interest. Ghyl reported that he was doing fairly well with the exercises but found difficulty with the catechism. Amiante nodded but Ghyl could see that his thoughts were elsewhere. Presently Amiante asked if Ghyl had recently seen Floriel, and it so happened that Ghyl had come upon Floriel at the Temple, where he took instruction on much the same basis as Ghyl.

"A peculiar lad, that one," Amiante remarked. "Easily persuaded, or so I would say; and with a streak of perversity to make him uncertain."

"That is what I feel too," said Ghyl. "Although now he seems to be buckling down to guild work."

"Yes, why not?" mused Amiante, as if the reverse—indolence, non-cuperativity—were standard conduct.

There was another silence, with Amiante frowning down at his plate as if for the first time he had become aware of what he was eating. He made an offhand reference to Helfred Cobol. "He means well enough, the agent; but he tried to reconcile too many conflicts. It makes him unhappy. He'll never do well."

Ghyl was interested in his father's opinion. "I've always thought him impatient and rude."

Amiante smiled, and looked off into his private thoughts. But he made another comment. "We are lucky with Helfred Cobol. The polite agents are harder to deal with. They offer a smooth surface; they are impervious . . . How would you like to be a welfare agent?"

Ghyl had never considered the possibility. "I'm not a Cobol. I suppose it's very cuperative, and they gain bonus vouchers, or so I hear. I'd rather be a lord."

"Naturally; who wouldn't?"

"But it's not possible in any way?"

"Not here in Fortinone. They keep themselves to themselves."

"On their home world were they lords? Or ordinary recipients like ourselves?"

Amiante shook his head. "Once, long ago, I worked for an off-world information agency and I might have asked, but during these times my thoughts were elsewhere. I don't

know the lords' home world. Perhaps Alode, perhaps Earth, which I've been told is the first home of all men."

"I wonder," said Ghyl, "why the lords live here in Fortinone. Why did they not choose Salula or Luschein or the Mang Islands?"

Amiante shrugged. "The same reason, no doubt, that we live where we do. Here we were born, here we live, here we will die."

"Suppose I went to Luschein and studied to be a space-man; would the lords hire me aboard their yachts?"

Amiante pursed his mouth dubiously. "The first difficulty is learning to be a spaceman. It is a popular occupation."

"Did you ever want to be a space-man?"

"Oh indeed. I had my dreams. Still—it may be best to carve wood. Who knows? We shall never starve."

"But we will never be financially independent," said Ghyl with a sniff.

"True." Amiante, rising took his plate to the wash-table where he scraped it very carefully and cleaned it with a minimum of water and sand.

Ghyl watched the meticulous process with detached interest. Amiante, so he knew, begrudged every check he was forced to pay over to the lords. It was a process which puzzled him. He asked: "The lords take 1.18 percent of everything we produce, don't they?"

"They do," said Amiante. "1.18 percent of the value of imports and exports alike."

"Then why do we use so little

water and power, and why do we walk so much? Is not the money paid regardless?"

Amiante's face took on a mulish cast, always the case when he spoke of vouchers paid to the lords. "Meters are everywhere. Meters measure everything except the air you breathe. Even the sewage is metered. The welfare agency then withholds from each recipient, on a pro-rated basis of use, enough to pay the lords, together with enough to pay themselves and all other functionaries. Little enough is left for the recipients."

Ghyl nodded dubiously. "How did the lords first come into possession of the utilities?"

"It happened perhaps fifteen hundred years ago. There were wars—with Bauredel, with the Mang Islands, with Lankenburg. Before were the Star Wars and before this the Dreadful War, and before this: wars without number. The last war, with Emperor Riskanie and the White-Eyed Men, resulted in the destruction of the city. Ambroy was devastated; the towers were destroyed; the folk lived like savages. The lords arrived in space-ships and set all in order. They generated power, started the water, built transit tubes, reopened the sewers, organized imports and exports. For this they asked and were conceded one percent. When they re-built the spaceport they were conceded an additional eighteen hundredths percent, and so it has remained."

"And when did we learn that duping was illegal and wrong?"

Amiante pursed his delicate mouth. "The strictures were first

applied about a thousand years ago, when our crafts began earning a reputation."

"And all during past history men have duped?" asked Ghyl in a voice of awe.

"As much as they saw fit." Amiante rose to his feet and went down to the workroom to carve on his screen. Ghyl took his dishes to the sink and as he washed he contemplated the bizarre old times when men worked without reference to welfare regulation. When all was tidy, he also went down to his bench and for a period worked on his own screen. Then he went to watch Amiante, who burnished surfaces already glistening, cleared burrs from grooves smooth beyond reproach. Ghyl tried to resume the conversation, but Amiante had no more to say. Ghyl presently bade him goodnight and climbed up to the third floor. He went to the window, looked out across Undle Square, thinking of the men who had passed along these ancient streets, marching to triumphs and defeats now forgotten. Above hung Damar, mottled blue, pink and yellow, casting a nacreous sheen on all the old buildings.

Into the street directly below shone light from the workroom. Amiante worked late—an unusual occurrence, Amiante preferring to use the light of day in order to deprive the lords. Other houses around the square, following a similar philosophy, were dark.

As Ghyl was about to turn away, the light from the workroom flickered and became obscured. Ghyl looked down in puzzlement. He did

not consider his father a secretive man: merely a person vague and given to fits of brooding. Why, therefore, would Amiante pull the blinds? Would there be a connection between the uncharacteristic secrecy and the parcels Amiante brought home that afternoon?

Ghyl went to sit on his couch. Welfare regulations put no explicit ban upon private or secret activity, so long as there was no violation of social policy, which meant, in effect, prior clearance with a welfare official.

Ghyl sat stiffly, hands by his side clutching the coverlets. He did not want to intrude or discover something to embarrass both himself and his father. But still . . . Ghyl reluctantly rose to his feet. He walked quietly downstairs, trying simultaneously to avoid furtiveness and noise; to go down unnoticed but without the uncomfortable feeling of being a sneak.

The cooking and living quarters smelled warm of porridge, with also a sharp tang of seaweed. Ghyl went across to the square of yellow light barred by balusters which marked the staircase . . . The light went off. Ghyl froze in his tracks. Was Amiante preparing to come upstairs? . . . But there were no footsteps. Amiante remained in the dark workroom.

But not quite dark. There came a sudden flash of blue-white light, which persisted a second or so. Then, a moment later, came a dim flickering glow. Frightened now, Ghyl stole to the staircase, looked down through the balusters and into the workroom.

For several moments he stared in puzzlement, pulse thudding so loudly he wondered that Amiante did not hear. But Amiante was absorbed in his work. He adjusted a mechanism which apparently had been contrived for the occasion: a box of rough fibre two feet long, a foot high and a foot wide, with a tube protruding from one end. Now Amiante went to a basin, peered down at something in the liquid: an object which glimmered pale. He shook his head, clicked his tongue in patent dissatisfaction. He extinguished the lights, all save a candle, and uncovering a second basin dipped a sheet of stiff white paper into what appeared to be a viscous syrup. He tilted the paper this way and that, drained it carefully, then set it on a rack in front of the box. He pressed a switch; from the tube came an intense beam of blue-white light. On the sheet of wet paper appeared a bright image.

The light vanished; Amiante swiftly took the sheet, laid it flat on the bench, covered it with a soft black powder, rubbed it carefully with a roller. Then lifting the paper he shook off the excess powder, dropped it into the basin. Then he turned on the lights, bent anxiously to examine the sheet. After a moment he nodded in satisfaction. He removed the first sheet, crumpled it, threw it aside. Then he returned to the table, repeated the entire process.

Ghyl watched fascinated. Clear, all too clear. His father was violating the most basic of all welfare regulations.

He was duplicating.

Ghyl examined Amiante with ter-

rified eyes, as if here were a stranger of unknown qualities. His conscientious father, the expert wood-carver, duping! The fact, while undeniable, was incredible! Ghyl wondered if he were awake or dreaming; the scene indeed had something of the grotesque quality of a dream.

Amiante meanwhile had inserted a new item into his projection box and focused the image carefully on a blank sheet of paper. Ghyl recognized one of the fragments from Amiante's collection of ancient writings.

Amiante worked now with more assurance. He made two copies; and so he continued, duplicating the old papers in his portfolio.

Presently Ghyl stole upstairs to his room, carefully restraining himself from speculation. The hour was too late. He did not want to think. But one dreadful apprehension remained: the light leaking through the shutters into the square. Suppose someone had observed the flickering, the peculiar fluctuations, and wondered as to the cause. Ghyl looked down from his window, and the light, going on, going off, then the blue flash, seemed inordinately suspicious. How could Amiante be so careless, so sublimely absent-minded, as not to wonder or worry about such matters?

To Ghyl's relief Amiante tired of his illicit occupation. Ghyl could hear him moving here and there around the workroom, stowing away his equipment.

Amiante came slowly up the stairs. Ghyl feigned slumber. Amiante went to bed. Ghyl lay awake, and it seemed to him that Amiante

likewise lay awake, thinking his strange thoughts . . . Ghyl finally drowsed off.

In the morning Amiante was his usual self. As Ghyl ate his breakfast of porridge and fish-flakes, he pondered: Amiante had duped eight, or even ten, items of his collection on the previous evening. It seemed not unlikely that he would dupe the rest. He must be made aware that the lights were visible. In as artless a voice as he could manage Ghyl asked, "Were you fixing our lights last night?"

Amiante looked at Ghyl with eyebrows first raised in puzzlement, then drooping almost comically in embarrassment. Amiante was perhaps the least expert dissembler alive. "Er—why do you ask that?"

"I happened to look out the window and I saw the lights going on and off. You had pulled the blinds but the light leaked past into the street. I suppose you were repairing the lamp?"

Amiante rubbed his face. "Something of the sort . . . Something of the sort indeed. Now then—do you go to the Temple today?"

Ghyl had forgotten. "Yes. Although I don't know the exercises."

"Well—do your best. Some folk have the knack, others don't."

Ghyl spent a miserable morning at the Temple, hopping awkwardly through simple patterns, while children years younger than himself, but far more devout, sprang about the Elemental Pattern with agility and finesse, winning commendation from the Guide Leaper. To make matters worse the Third As-

sistant Saltator visited the hall and saw Ghyl's hops and sprawling jumps with astonishment; to such an extent that presently he threw his hands into the air and strode from the hall in disgust.

When Ghyl returned home he found that Amiante had started a new screen. Instead of the usual arzak, he had brought forth a panel of costly ing as high as his eyes, wider than his outstretched arms. All afternoon he worked transferring his cartoon to the panel. It was a striking design, but Ghyl could not help but feel a glum amusement at Amiante's inconsistency: that he could counsel Ghyl to gayety, and then himself embark upon a work pervaded with melancholy. The cartoon indicated a lattice festooned with foliage, from which peered a hundred small grave faces, each different, yet somehow alike in the disturbing intensity of their gazes. Across the top were two words: REMEMBER ME in a loose and graceful calligraphy.

Amiante left off work on his new panel late in the afternoon. He yawned, stretched, rose to his feet, went to the door, looked out across the square, now busy with folk returning to their homes from work about the city: stevedores, boat-builders, mechanics; workers in wood, metal and stone; merchants and servicers; scribes and clerks; food processors, slaughterers, fishermen; statisticians and welfare workers; house-girls, nurses, doctors and dentists—these latter all female.

As if struck by a sudden thought, Amiante examined the blinds. He stood rubbing his chin, then turned



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a brief glance back to Ghyl, who pretended not to notice.

Amiante went to the closet, brought forth a flask, poured two glasses of mild reed-blossom wine, put one by Ghyl's elbow, sipped the other. Ghyl, glancing up, found it hard to reconcile this man, a trifle portly, calm of face, somewhat pale, somewhat inward-turned but wholly gentle, with the intent figure which had worked at irregularity the preceding night. If only it were a dream, a nightmare! The welfare agents, helpful and long-suffering, could become relentless when regulations were flouted. One day Ghyl had seen a wife-murderer being dragged away for rehabilitation, and the idea of Amiante being treated so caused him such terror that his stomach churned over.

Amiante was discussing Ghyl's screen: "—trifle more relief, here in this bark detail. The general idea is vitality, young folk romping in the country; why diminish the theme by over-delicacy?"

"Yes," muttered Ghyl. "I'll carve somewhat deeper."

"I think I'd like less detail in the grass; it seems to rob the leaves . . . But this is your interpretation, and you must do as you think best."

Ghyl nodded numbly. He put down his chisel and drank the wine; he would carve no more today. Usually he was the one to initiate conversation, to talk while Amiante listened; but now the roles were reversed. Amiante was now considering their evening meal. "Last night we used seaweed; I thought it somewhat stale. What do you say to a salad of plinchets with perhaps a

few nuts and a bit of cheese? Or would you prefer bread and cold meat? It shouldn't be too dear."

Ghyl said he'd as soon eat bread and meat, and Amiante sent him off to the shopkeeper. Looking over his shoulder Ghyl saw with dismay that Amiante was inspecting the blinds, swinging them to and fro, open and shut.

That night Amiante once more worked his duplicating machine, but he carefully muffled the blinds. Light no longer flickered out upon the square, to excite the wonder of some passing night agent.

Ghyl went miserably to bed, thankful only that Amiante—since he seemed determined upon irregularity—at least was taking precautions against being caught in the act.

Chapter 6

In spite of Amiante's precautions, his misconduct was discovered—not by Helfred Cobol who, knowing something of Amiante's disposition, might have contented himself with unofficial outrage and a close watch upon Amiante thereafter, but unluckily, by Ells Wolleg, the Guild Delegate, a fussy little man with a dyspeptic yellow owl's-face. In making a routine check of Amiante's tools and work conditions, he lifted a scrap of wood and there, where Amiante had carelessly laid them, were three faulty copies of an old chart. Wolleg bent forward frowning, his first emotion simple irritation that Amiante should untidily mingle charts with Guild-sponsored work; then, as the fact of duplica-

tion became manifest, he emitted a comical fluting yell. Amiante, straightening tools and cleaning away scrap at the opposite end of the table, looked around with eyebrows twisted in sad dismay. Ghyl sat rigid.

Wolleg turned upon Amiante, eyes glittering from behind spectacles. "Be so good as to Spay-line the Welfare Agency, at once."

Amiante shook his head. "I have no Spay connection."

Wolleg snapped his fingers toward Ghyl. "Run, boy, as fast as you can. Summon here the welfare agents."

Ghyl half-rose from his bench, then settled back. "No."

Ells Wolleg wasted no time arguing. He went to the door, looked around the square, marched to a public Spay terminal.

As soon as Wolleg had departed the shop, Ghyl jumped to his feet. "Quick, let's hide the other things!"

Amiante stood torpidly, unable to act.

"Quick!" hissed Ghyl. "He'll be back at once!"

"Where can I put them?" mumbled Amiante. "They'll search everywhere."

Ghyl ran to the cabinet, pulled down Amiante's equipment. Into the box he piled rubbish and scrap. The lens tube he filled with brads and clips and stood it among other such containers. The bulb which furnished the blue flash and the power block were more of a problem, which Ghyl solved by running with them to the back door and throwing them over the fence into a waste area.

Amiante watched for a moment with a dull brooding gaze, then, struck by a thought, he ran upstairs. He returned seconds before Wolleg re-entered the shop.

Wolleg spoke in stiff measured tones: "My concerns, strictly speaking, are only with guild by-laws and work standards. Nevertheless I am a public official and I have done my duty. I may add that I am shamed to find duplicated stuffs, undoubtedly of irregular origin, in the custody of a wood-carver."

"Yes," mumbled Amiante. "It must come as a great blow."

Wolleg turned his attention to the duplicated papers, and gave a grunt of disgust. "How did these articles reach your hands?"

Amiante smiled wanly. "As you guessed, from an irregular source."

Ghyl exhaled a small sigh. At least Amiante did not intend to blurt forth everything in a spasm of contemptuous candor. Three welfare agents arrived: Helfred Cobol and a pair of supervisors with keen and darting eyes. Wolleg explained the circumstances, displayed the duplicated papers. Helfred Cobol looked at Amiante with a sardonic shake of the head and a curl of the lips. The two other welfare agents made a brief search of the shop but found nothing more; it was clear that their suspicions did not range so far as the theory that Amiante himself had been duplicating.

Presently the two supervisors departed with Amiante, in spite of Ghyl's protests.

Helfred Cobol drew him aside. "Mind your manners, boy. Your

father must go to the office and respond to a questionnaire. If his charge is light—and I believe this to be the case—he will escape rehabilitation.”

Ghyl had heard previous references to one’s charge being high or low, but had assumed the phrase to be a colloquialism or a figure of speech. Now he was not so sure. There were menacing overtones to the words. He felt too depressed to put any questions to Helfred Cobol, and went to sit at this bench.

Helfred Cobol walked here and there around the room, picking up a tool, fingering a bit of wood, looking occasionally toward Ghyl, as if there were something he wished to say but found himself unable to verbalize. Finally he muttered something unintelligible and went to stand in the doorway, looking out upon the square.

Ghyl wondered what he was waiting for. Amiante’s return? This hope was dashed by the arrival of a tall gray-haired female agent, whose function apparently was to assume authority over the premises. Helfred Cobol gave her a curt nod and departed without further words.

The woman spoke to Ghyl in a terse clear voice: “I am Matron Hantillebeck. Since you are a minor, I have been assigned to maintain the household until such time as a responsible adult returns. In short, you are in my charge. You need not necessarily vary from your normal routine; you may work, or practice devotionals, whichever is customary for you at this time.”

Ghyl silently bent over his screen. Matron Hantillebeck locked the door,

sniffing at Amiante’s less-than-meticulous housekeeping. She came back to the workshop, leaving lights ablaze everywhere in the house, even though afternoon light still entered the windows.

Ghyl essayed a timid protest. “If you don’t mind, I’ll turn out the lights. My father does not care to nourish the lords any more than necessary.”

The remark irritated Matron Hantillebeck. “I do mind. The house is dark and disgustingly dirty. I wish to see where I am putting my feet. I do not care to step in something nasty.”

Ghyl considered a moment, then offered tentatively: “There’s nothing nasty about, really. I know my father would be furious—and if I may turn off the lights, I’ll run ahead of you and turn them back on whenever you care to walk.”

Matron Hantillebeck jerked about and fixed Ghyl with so ferocious a glare that Ghyl moved back a step. “Let the lights stay on! What care I for the penury of your father? The next thing to a Chaoticist, or so I reckon! Does he want to throttle Fortinone? Must we eat mud on his account?”

“I don’t understand,” Ghyl faltered. “My father is a good man. He would hurt no one.”

“Bah.” The matron swung away, made herself comfortable on a couch and began to crochet silk web. Ghyl slowly went to his screen. The matron took a rope of candied seaweed from her reticule, then a flask of soursnap beer and a slab of curd-cake. Ghyl went up to the living quarters and thought no more of

Matron Hantillebeck. He ate a plate of broad-beans, then in defiance of the matron, extinguished the lights throughout the upper stories, and went to his couch. He had no knowledge of how the matron passed the night, for in the morning when he went below-stairs, she was gone.

Not long after Amiante shuffled into the shop. His scant gray-gold hair was tousled, his eyes were like puddles of mercury. He looked at Ghyl; Ghyl looked at him. Ghyl asked, "Did—did they harm you?"

Amiante shook his head. He came a few steps further into the room, looked tentatively here and there. He went to a bench, seated himself, ran his hand across his head, further rumpling his hair.

Ghyl watched in apprehension, trying to decide whether or not his father was ill. Amiante raised a hand in reassurance. "No need for concern. I slept poorly . . . Did they search?"

"Not well."

Amiante nodded vaguely. He rose, went to the door, stood looking out across the square, as if the scene—the heelcorn trees, the dusty annel bushes, the structures opposite—were strange to him. He turned, went to his bench, considered the half-carved faces of his new screen.

Ghyl asked: "Can I bring you something to eat? Or tea?"

"Not just now." Amiante went upstairs. He returned a minute later with his old portfolio which he put down upon the workbench.

Ghyl asked in terror: "Are the duplicates there?"

"No. They are under the tiles." Amiante seemed not to wonder at

Ghyl's knowledge of his activities.

"But—why?" asked Ghyl. "Why did you duplicate these things?"

Amiante slowly raised his head, looked eye to eye with Ghyl. "If I did not," he asked, "who would?"

"But—the regulations . . ." Ghyl's voice trailed off. Amiante made no remark. The silence was more meaningful than anything he could have said.

Amiante opened the portfolio. "I had hoped for you to discover these for yourself, when you had learned to read."

"What are they?"

"Various documents from the past—when regulations were less irksome, and perhaps less necessary." He lifted one of the papers, glanced at it, set it aside. "Some are very precious." He sorted through the documents. "Here: the charter of old Ambroy. Barely intelligible, and now all but unknown. Nonetheless, it is still in force." He put it aside, touched another. "Here: the legend of Emphyrio."

Ghyl looked down at the characters, and recognized them for old Archaic, still beyond his comprehension. Amiante read it aloud. He came to the end of the page, halted, put down the paper.

"Is that all?" asked Ghyl.

"I don't know."

"But how does it end?"

"I don't know that either."

Ghyl grimaced in dissatisfaction. "Is it true?"

Amiante shrugged. "Who knows? The Historian, perhaps."

"Who is he?"

Someone far from here." Amiante went to the cabinet, brought down

vellum, ink, a pen. He began to copy the fragment. "I must copy these all; I must disseminate them, where they will not be lost." He bent over the vellum.

Ghyl watched a few minutes, then turned as the doorway darkened. A man came slowly into the shop. Amiante looked up, Ghyl stood back. The visitor was a tall man with a big handsome head, a brush of fine gray hair. He wore a jacket of black broadcloth with a dozen vertical ruffles under each arm, a white vest, trousers of black and brown stripe, a rich dignified costume, that of a man of position. Ghyl, who had seen him before at guild-meetings recognized Rt. Blaise Fodo, the Guild-master himself.

Amiante rose slowly to his feet.

Fodo spoke in a rich earnest voice, "I heard of your difficulties, Rt. Tarvoke, and I came to extend you the good wishes of the Guild, and wise counsel, should you require it."

"Thank you, Rt. Fodo," said Amiante. "I wish you had been here to counsel Ells Wolleg from turning me in. That would have been 'counsel' when I needed it."

The Guild-master frowned. "Unfortunately I can't foresee every indiscretion of every member. And Delegate Wolleg of course performed his duty as he saw it. But I am surprised to see you scrivening. What do you do?"

Amiante spoke in a voice of the most precise clarity. "I copy an ancient manuscript, that it may be preserved for the times to come."

"What is the document?"

"The legend of Emphyrio."

"Well, then, admirable—but

surely this is the domain of the scribes! They do not carve wood, we neither indite nor inscribe. What would we gain?" He waved his hand at Amiante's inexact writing with a small smile of indulgent distaste, as if at the antics of a dirty child. "The copy is by no means flawless."

Amiante scratched his chin. "It is legible, I hope . . . Do you read Archaic?"

"Certainly. What old affair are you so concerned with?" He picked up the fragment and tilting back his head puzzled out the sense of the archaic text:

On the world of Aume, or some say, Home, which men had taken by toil and pain, and where they had established farmsteads along the shore of the sea, came down a monstrous horde from the dark moon Sigil.

The men had long put by their weapons and now spoke gently: "Monsters: the look of deprivation invests you like an odor. If you hunger, eat of our food; share our plenty until you are appeased."

The monsters could not speak but their great horns yelled: "We do not come for food."

"There is about you the madness of the moon Sigil. Come you for peace? Rest then; listen to our music, lave your feet in the waves of the sea; soon you will be allayed."

"We do not come for respite," bayed the great horns.

"There is about you the forlorn despair of the outcast, which is irremedial, for love we cannot provide; so you must return to the dark moon Sigil, and come to terms with those who sent you forth."

"We do not come for love," raved the very horns.

"What then is your purpose?"

"We are here to enslave the men of Aume, or as some say, Home, to ease ourselves upon their labor. Know us for your masters, and he who looks askance shall be stamped beneath our terrible feet."

The men were enslaved, and set to such onerous tasks as the monsters devised and found needful. In due course, Emphyrio, the son of fisher-folk, was moved to rebellion, and led his band into the mountains. He employed a magic tablet, and all who heard his words knew them for truth, so that many men set themselves against the monsters.

With fire and flame, with torment and char, the monsters from Sigil wrought their vengeance. Still the voice of Emphyrio rang down from the mountain, and all who heard were moved to defiance.

The monsters marched to the mountains, battering rock from rock, and Emphyrio retired to the far places: the islands of reed, the for-ests and murks.

After came the monsters, affording no respite. In the Col of Deal, behind the Maul Mountains, Emphyrio confronted the horde. He spoke, with his voice of truth, and his magic tablet, and sent forth flashing words: "Observe! I hold the magic tablet of truth! You are Monster; I am Man. Each is alone; each sees dawn and dusk; each feels pain and pain's ease. Why should one be victor and the other victim? We will never agree; never shall you know gain by the toil of man! Submit to the what-must-be! If you fail to heed, then you must taste a bitter brew

and never again walk the sands of of dark Sigil."

The monsters could not disbelieve the voice of Emphyrio and halted in wonder. One sent forth his flashing words: "Emphyrio! Come with us to Sigil and speak in the Catademon; for there is the force which controls us to evil deeds."

(end of fragment)

Blaise Fodo slowly laid the paper on the desk. For a moment his eyes were unfocused, his mouth pushed forward into a thoughtful pink oval. "Yes . . . Yes, indeed." He gave his shoulders a twitch, settled his black jacket. "Amazing, certain of these old legends. Still we must maintain a sense of proportion. You are an expert wood-carver; your screens are excellent. Your fine son, too, has a productive future before him. So why waste valuable work-time inditing old tales? It becomes an obsession! Especially," he added meaningfully, "when it leads to irregularity acts. You must be realistic, Rt. Tarvoke!"

Amiante shrugged, put the vel-lum and ink to the side. "Perhaps you are right." He took up a chisel and began to carve at his screen.

But Rt. Blaise Fodo was not to be put aside so easily. For another half hour he paced back and forth across the work-room, looking down first across Ghyl's shoulders, then Amiante's. He spoke further of Amiante's trespass and chided Amiante for allowing a collector's avidity to overcome him, so that he bought illicit reproductions. He also addressed Ghyl, urging industry, devoutness and humility. "The path of life is well-trod; the wisest and best have

erected guide-posts, bridges and warning signals; it is either mulishness or arrogance to seek from side to side for new or better routes. So then: look to your Welfare Agent, to your Guild Delegate, to your Guide Leaper; follow their instructions. And you will lead a life of placid content."

Guild-master Fodo at last departed. As soon as the door closed behind him, Amiante put down his chisel and returned to his copying. Ghyl had nothing to say, though his heart was full and his throat hurt with premonition. Presently he went upon the square to buy food, and as luck would have it met Helfred Cobol on his rounds.

The Welfare Agent looked down at him with a quizzical stare. "What has come over Amiante, that he behaves like a Chaoticist?"

"I don't know," said Ghyl. "But he is no Chaoticist. He is a good man."

"I realize as much, which is why I am concerned. Surely he cannot profit by irregularity acts; and you must realize this as well."

Ghyl privately thought Amiante's conduct somewhat queer but by no means hurtful or wrong. He did not, however, argue this with Helfred Cobol.

"He is too bold, alas, for his own good," the Welfare Agent went on. "You must help him. You are a responsible boy. Keep your father safe. Dallying with impossible legends and inflammatory tracts can only enrich his rod!"

Ghyl frowned. "Is that the same as 'increasing his charge'?"

"Yes. Do you know what is meant?"

Ghyl shook his head.

"Well then, at the Welfare Agency are trays of small rods, each numbered, each representing a man. I am represented by such a rod, as well as Amiante and yourself. Most of the rods are pure inactive iron; others are magnetized. At every offense or delinquency a carefully calculated magnetic charge is applied to the rod. If there are no new offenses the magnetism presently wanes and disappears. But if offenses continue, the magnetism aguments and at last pulls down a signal, and the offender must be rehabilitated."

Ghyl, awed and depressed, looked away across the square. Then he asked, "When a person is rehabilitated, what happens?"

"Ha ha!" exclaimed Helfred Cobol dourly, "you ask after our guild secrets. We do not talk of these things. It is enough to know that the offender is cured of irregularity tendencies."

"Do noncups have rods at the Agency?"

"No. They are not recipients; they are outside the system. When they commit crimes, as often they do, they find no understanding or rehabilitation—they are expelled from Ambroy."

Ghyl clutched his parcels to his chest, shivered, perhaps to a gust of cold wind which dipped down out of the sky. "I had best be home," he told Helfred Cobol in a small voice.

"Home with you then. I'll look in on your father in ten or fifteen minutes."

Ghyl nodded and returned home. Amiante had fallen asleep at his workbench, head down upon his

arms. Ghyl stood back in horror. To right and left, spread out on the bench, was duplicated material: every item that Amiante had processed. It seemed as if he had been attempting to organize his papers when drowsiness had overtaken him.

Ghyl dropped the parcels of food, closed and bolted the door, ran forward. It was useless to awaken Amiante and expect alertness. Frantically he gathered all the material together, stacked it into a box, covered it over with shavings and scrap and thrust it under his desk. Only now did he try to arouse his father. "Wake up! Helfred Cobol is on his way!"

Amiante groaned, lurched back, looked at Ghyl with eyes only half-aware.

Ghyl saw two more sheets of paper he previously had missed. He seized them, and as he did so there came a knock at the door. Ghyl shoved the papers down into the shavings, made a last survey of the room. It appeared to be bare, innocent of illicit paper.

Ghyl opened the door. Helfred Cobol looked quizzically down at him. "Since when do you bar the door against the arrival of the Welfare Agent?"

"A mistake," stammered Ghyl. "I meant no harm."

Amiante by this time had come to his wits and was looking back and forth along the bench with a worried expression.

Helfred Cobol came forward. "A few last words with you, Rt. Tarvoke."

"Last words'?"

"Yes. I have worked this ward

many years, and we have known each other just so long. But I am becoming too old for field duty and I am being transferred to an administrative office in Elsen. I come to say goodbye to you and Ghyl."

Amiante slowly rose to his feet. "I am sorry to see you go."

Helfred Cobol gave his sardonic grimace of a smile. "Well then: my last few words: attend to your wood-carving, try to lead your son into the ways of orthodoxy. Why do you not go leap with him at the Temple? He would profit by your example."

Amiante nodded politely.

"Well then," said Helfred Cobol, "I'll say goodbye to you both, and commend you to the best attention of Schute Colbol, who will take over in my place."

Chapter 7

Schute Cobol was a man with a style distinctly different from that of Helfred Cobol. He was younger, more punctilious in manner and dress, more formal in his interviews. He was a man brisk and precise, with a lean visage, a down-drooping mouth, black hair bristling up behind his head. On his preliminary rounds he explained to all that he intended to work by the strict letter of Welfare Agency regulations. He made clear to Amiante and Ghyl his disapproval of what he considered a lax way of life. "Each of you, with above-average capacity, according to your psychiatric rating, produces well under the norm for this rate. You, young Rt. Tarvoke, are far from diligent at either Guild-school or Temple—"

"He takes instruction from me,"

said Amiante in measured voice.

"Eh? You teach what, additional to wood-carving?"

"I have taught him to read and write, such calculation as I know and hopefully a few other matters as well."

"I strongly suggest that he prepare more earnestly for his Secondary Status at the Temple. According to my records, he attends without regularity and is not proficient in any of the patterns."

Amiante shrugged. "Perhaps later in life . . ."

"What of yourself?" demanded Schute Cobol. "It appears that during the last fourteen years you have visited the Temple but twice and leapt but once."

"Surely more than that. Are the Agency records accurate?"

"Of course the Agency records are accurate! What a thing to ask! Do you have records in conflict, may I ask?"

"No."

"Well then, why have you leapt only once during these last fourteen years?"

Amiante ran his hands fretfully through his hair. "I am not agile. I do not know the patterns . . . time presses . . ."

Schute Cobol at last departed the shop. Ghyl looked to Amiante for some comment but Amiante merely gave his head a weary shake and bent over his screen.

Amiante's screen of the hundred faces received a 9.503, or 'Acme' rating at the Judgment*, and his total submission averaged at 8.626, well into 'First Class' or export category.

Ghyl's single screen received a 6.855 rating, comfortably within the 6.240 limit of the 'Second-Class' or 'Domestic Use' category and so went to the holding warehouse in East Town. Ghyl was complimented upon the ease of his design but was urged to greater finesse and delicacy.

Ghyl, who had been hoping for a 'First Class' rating, was dejected. Amiante refused to comment upon the judgment. He said merely: "Start another screen. If we please them with our screens, we produce 'First's'. If we do not, our screens are 'Seconds' or 'Rejects'. Therefore, let us please the judges. It is not too difficult."

"Very well," said Ghyl. "My next screen will be 'Girls Kissing Boys'."

"Hmm." Amiante considered. "You are twelve years old? Best wait a year or so. Why not produce a

*The Judgment, from the standpoint of the Ambroy craftsman, was the year's most important event, establishing as it did his stipend for the following year. The judgments were conducted in accordance to an elaborate ritual and generated vast drama—to such an extent that the judges were applauded or criticized for the ceremonial richness of their performances.

Three separate teams of judges worked independently, at the great Boimarc warehouse in East Town and rated each item of work produced by the Ambroy craftsmen. The first team included the master of the craftsman's guild, an expert on the particular class of item from one of the trans-stellar depots, and a Boimarc lord, presumably selected also for his expertise. On the second team was the chairman of the Inter-Guild Benevolent Association, the Craft Guidance Director of the Welfare Agency, the Arbiter of Comparative Beatitudes from the Main Temple. The third team consisted of two Boimarc lords and an ordinary recipient chosen by random lot from the population, who received the title Independent Dignitary and a doubled stipend.

The first team investigated only a single category of objects, with ratings weighted double. The second and third teams inspected all articles.

standard design: possibly "Willows and Birds'?"

So the months passed. Despite Schute Cobol's explicit disapproval, Ghyl spent little time at Temple exercises, and avoided Guild School. From Amiante he learned Archaic One and such human history as Amiante himself knew: "Men originated on a single world, a planet called Earth, or so it is generally believed. Earthmen learned how to send ships through space, and so initiated human history, though I suppose there was previous history on Earth. The first men to come to Halma found colonies of vicious insects—creatures as big as children—living in mounds and tunnels. There were great battles until the insects were destroyed. You will find pictures of the things at the Hall of Curios—perhaps you've seen them?"

Ghyl nodded. "I always felt sorry for them."

"Yes, perhaps . . . Men have not always been merciful. There have been many wars, all forgotten now. We are not a historical people; we seem to live for the events of the day—or more accurately, from one Judgment to the next."

"I would like to visit other worlds," mused Ghyl. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could earn enough vouchers to travel elsewhere, and make our living by carving screens?"

Amiante smiled wistfully. "Other worlds grow no such woods as ing and arzack, or even daban or bark or hacknut . . . And then the crafts of Ambroy are famous. If we worked elsewhere—"

"We could say we were Ambroy craftsmen!"

Amiante shook his doubtfully. "I have never heard of it being done. The Welfare Agency would not approve, I am certain."

On Ghyl's fourteenth birthday he was accepted into the Temple as a full member, and enrolled in a class for religious and sociological indoctrination. The Guide Leaper explained the Elemental Pattern more carefully than had Ghyl's previous instructors: "The pattern, of course, is symbolical; nonetheless it provides an infinite range of real relevancies. By now you know the various tablets: the virtues and vices, the blasphemies and devotions which are represented. The sincere affirm their orthodoxy by leaping the traditional patterns, moving from symbol to symbol, avoiding vices, endorsing virtues. Even the aged and infirm endeavor to leap several patterns a day."

Ghyl leapt and skipped with the others and finally managed a fair degree of precision, so that he was not singled out for derision.

During the summer of his fifteenth year his class made a three-day pilgrimage to Rabia Scarp in the Meagher Mounts to inspect and study the Glyph. They rode Over-trend cars to the farm village Libon, then, accompanied by a wagon which carried bed-rolls and provisions, set out on foot toward the hills.

The first night the group camped at the foot of a rocky knoll, beside a pond fringed with reeds and water-willow. There were fires and singing and talking; Ghyl had never known so merry a time. The adventure

was given spice by the not-too-distant presence of Wirwans, a race of semi-intelligent beings about eight feet tall with heavy snouted heads, black opal eyes, rough hard skins mottled purple, black and brown. The Wirwans, according to the Guide Leaper, were indigenous to Halma and had existed in the Meagher Mounts at the time of the human advent. "They are not to be approached should we sight them," warned the guide, an intense man who never smiled. "They are inoffensive and secretive, but have been known to strike out if molested. We may see some among the rocks, although they live in tunnels and holes and do not range very far."

One of the boys, a brash youngster named Nion Bohart, said, "They throw their minds; they read thoughts; isn't that so?"

"Nonsense," said the guide. "That would be a miracle, and they have no knowledge of Finuka, the single source of miracles."

"I have heard that they do not talk," Nion Bohart insisted with a kind of flippant obstinacy. "They throw their thoughts across far distances, by a means no one understands."

The leader turned sharply away from the conversation. "Now then, all to your blankets. Tomorrow is an important day; we climb Rabia Scarp to see the Glyph."

Next morning, after a breakfast of tea, biscuits and dried sea-plum, the boys set forth. The country was barren: rocks and slopes covered with a harsh thorny scrub.

About noon they reached Rabia Scarp. During some ancient storm

the scarp had been struck by lightning, with the result that a boss of black rock was traced with a set of complicated marks. Certain of these marks, which priests had enclosed in a gold frame, bore the semblance of archaic characters, and read:

FINUKA DISPOSES!

Before the sacred Glyph a large platform had been built, with an Elemental Pattern inlaid in blocks of quartz, jasper, red chert, onyx. For an hour the guide and the students performed ritual exercises, then taking their gear, moved on up to the crest of the scarp, and there pitched camp. The outlook was glorious. Ghyl had never known such far vistas. To the east was a deep valley, then the lowering mass of the Meagher Mounts, the haunt of Wirwans. To north and south the ridges thrust and bulked away, at last to become indistinct, in Baurel to the north, in the Great Alkali Flats to the south. To the west lay the inhabited areas of Fortinone, an expanse of muted brown, gray, black-green, all toned yellow-brown by the sunlight, as if under a transparent film of old varnish. Far away, shone a quicksilver glimmer, like a heat vibration: the ocean. A moribund land, with more ruins than inhabited buildings, and Ghyl wondered how it had seemed two thousand years ago when the cities were whole. Sitting on a flat rock, knees clasped in his arms, Ghyl thought of Emphyrio and imposed the locale of the legend upon the landscape. There, in the Meagher Mountains, Emphyrio had confronted the horde from the mad moon

Sígil—which might well have been Damar. There: that great gouge to the northeast: surely the Col of Deal! And there: the field of battle where Emphyrio had called through his magic tablet. The monsters? Who but the Wirwans? . . . A peremptory summons broke into Ghyl's musings; it was the group leader announcing a need for firewood. The spell of the moment was broken, presently to be replaced by another: the spectacle of the sunset, with the land and sky to the west drowned in a sad effulgence, the color of antique amber.

Pots hanging over tripods gave off a savory odor of ham and lentils; bramblewood fires crackled and spat; smoke drifted off against the dusk. The scene twined a deep-lying node in Ghyl's mind, sent peculiar chills across his skin. In just such a manner, by just such fires, had crouched his primeval ancestors: on Earth, or whatever far planet men had first asserted their identity.

Never had food tasted so good to Ghyl. After the meal, with fires burning low and the heavens awesomely immediate, he felt as if he were on the verge of some wonderful new comprehension. Regarding himself? The world? The nature of man? He could not be sure. The knowledge hung at the brink of his mind, trembling . . . The Guide Leaper also was inspired by the wonder of the night sky. He pointed and stated: "Before us, and I wish all to observe, is magnificence beyond human conception! Notice the brilliance of the *Mirabilis* stars, and there, somewhat above, the very rim of the galaxy! Is it not glorious? You, Nion

Bohart, what do you think? Does not the open sky enthrall you to your very marrow!"

"Yes indeed," declared Nion Bohart.

"It is grandeur of the most excellent and majestic sort. If no other indication offered, here at least is vindication for all the leaping done in praise of Finuka!"

Recently, among the bits and fragments in Amiante's portfolio, Ghyl had come upon a few lines of philosophical dialogue which had haunted him; and now, innocently, he spoke them:

"In a situation of infinity, every possibility, no matter how remote, must find physical expression."

"Does that mean yes or no?"

"Both and neither."

The group leader, irked by the interruption and by the break in the mood he was trying to establish, asked in a cold voice, "What is all this obscurantist ambiguity? I fail to understand!"

"Simple really," drawled Nion Bohart, a year or so older than Ghyl and inclined to impertinence. "It means that anything is possible."

"Not quite," said Ghyl, "it means more than that; I think it's an important idea!"

"Bah, rubbish," snorted the leader. "But perhaps you will deign to elucidate."

Ghyl, suddenly in the focus of everyone's attention, felt awkward and tongue-tied, the more so that he did not fully comprehend the proposition he had been called upon to explain. He looked around the circle of firelight, to find all eyes upon him.

He spoke in a diffident stammer: "As I see it, the cosmos is probably infinite, which means—well, infinite. So there are local situations—a tremendous number of them. Indeed, in a situation of infinity, there are an infinite set of local conditions, so that somewhere there is bound to be anything, if this anything is even remotely possible. Perhaps it is; I really don't know what the chances—"

"Come, come!" snapped the leader. "You are blithering! Declare us this dramatic enlightenment in plain words!"

"Well, it might be that in certain local regions, by the very laws of chance, a god like Finuka might exist and exert local control. Maybe even here, on the North Continent, or over the whole world. In other localities, gods might be absent. It depends, of course, upon the probability of the particular kind of god." Ghyl hesitated, then added modestly, "I don't know what this is, of course."

The leader drew a deep breath. "Has it occurred to you that the individual who attempts to reckon the possibility or probability of a god is puffing himself up as the spiritual and intellectual superior of the god?"

"No reason why we can't have a stupid god," muttered Nion Bohart in an undertone which the leader failed to catch. With no more than a glare for Nion Bohart, he continued: "It is a posture, may I say, of boundless arrogance. And also, the local situation is not under discussion. The Glyph reads, 'Finuka disposes!'. This clearly means that Finuka controls *all*! Not just a few acres here and a few acres there. If this were the case the Glyph would read 'Finu-

ka disposes across the township of Elbaum, in Breuben Precinct, likewise along the Dodrechten mudflats' or some such set of qualifications. Is this not obvious? The Glyph reads 'Finuka disposes!' which means Finuka rules and judges—*everywhere*! So then—let us hear no more logic-chopping."

Ghyl held his tongue. The leader once again turned his attention to the skies and pointed out various celestial objects.

One by one the boys dropped off to sleep. Early the next morning they broke camp, leapt a final exercise before the Blyph and marched back downhill to the Overtrend depot at a nearby mining town.

During the entire return trip the leader said nothing to Ghyl or to Nion Bohart, but upon their next visit to the Temple both were transferred to a special section for difficult, obstreperous or recalcitrant boys, in charge of a resolute special indoctrinator.

The class, to Ghyl's surprise, included his old friend Floriel Huzsuis, now a gentle unconventional lad, almost girlishly handsome. Floriel was reckoned a problem not from obstinacy, or insolence, but rather from day-dreaming vagary, compounded by an involuntary half-smile, as if he found the class irresistibly amusing in all its aspects. This was far from the truth, but poor Floriel, by reason of his expression, was continually upbraided for facetiousness and levity.

The indoctrinator, Saltator Honson Ospude, was a tall grim man with a clenched passionate face. Intensely dedicated to his profession, he was without lightness, flexibility

or humor and sought to compel the minds of his charges by the force of his own fervent orthodoxy. Nonetheless he was an erudite man, widely read, and introduced dozens of interesting topics into the class-work routine.

"Every society is constructed upon a foundation of assumptions," stated Honson Ospude on one occasion. "There is a multiplicity of such assumptions, from which each society selects: hence the multitude of galactic civilizations, all different. The society of Fortinone, of course, is one of the most enlightened, based as it is upon the most lofty aspirations of the human spirit. We are a lucky people. The axioms which shape our lives are ineffable but indisputable; equally important, they are efficacious. They guarantee us security from want, and offer each of us, so long as he be diligent, the chance to become financially independent."

At this, Nion Bohart could not restrain a caw of laughter. "Financial independence? If you kidnap a lord, perhaps."

Honson Ospude, neither outraged nor nonplussed by the interruption, met the challenge, for such it was, head on. "If you kidnap a lord, you'll gain not financial independence but rehabilitation."

"If you get caught."

"The chances are strong for rehabilitation," stated Honson Ospude. "Even if you succeeded in kidnapping a lord, you could no longer profit. The lord would not pay. Conditions are no longer barbaric. The lords have bound themselves to pay no further ransoms; hence there is

no longer a financial incentive to the crime of kidnaping."

Ghyl remarked, perhaps inadvisedly, "It seems to me that if the lords had to choose either payment or death, they would ignore the compact and pay."

Honson Ospude looked from Nion Bohart to Ghyl, then around the class, all of whom were attending with great interest. "It seems that we have here a fine collection of would-be bandits. Well, my lads, a word of warning: you'll encounter grief and woe by working for chaos. Regulation is the single frail barrier between savagery and welfare; break down the barrier and you destroy not only yourselves but all else besides. Enough for the day. Think well upon what I have told you. All to the Pattern."

Over the course of time certain members of the class—among them Floriel Huzsuis, Nion Bohart, Mael Villy, Uger Harspitz, Shulk Odle-bush, one or two others—drew together to form a clique, with Nion Bohart, a swaggering, restless, reckless youth, the informal leader. Nion Bohart was a year or two older than the others: a tall broad-shouldered youth, handsome as a lord, with beautiful green eyes, a thin mouth twitching first down the right side and up the left, then down the left and up the right. In many ways Nion Bohart was an amusing companion, always ready for devilry, although he never seemed to be apprehended in mischief. It was always the obstinate Uger Harspitz or dreamy Floriel who were discovered and punished for mischief conceived by Nion Bohart.

Ghyl held himself apart from the group, though he was fond of Floriel. Nion Bohart's mischief seemed to verge on irresponsibility, and Ghyl thought his hold upon Floriel's imagination to be both unfortunate and unhealthy.

Honson Osupude detested Nion Bohart, but tried to deal as fairly as possible with the contumacious youth. Nion Bohart, however, and others of the clique, took pains to attack his equanimity: doubting his assumptions, weighing the value of universal orthodoxy, marking as if by mistake incorrect or even blasphemous symbols during the leaping which opened and closed each class. Ghyl, anxious only to attract a minimum of notice, conducted himself with discretion, to the disgust of Floriel and Nion Bohart, who wanted him to take an active part in their mischief. Ghyl merely laughed at them and his association with the group became so tenuous as to be non-existent.

The years passed. At last, according to statute, the class was terminated. Ghyl, now eighteen years old, was sent forth as a full recipient of Fortinone.

To celebrate Ghyl's discharge from the school Amiante consulted the victuallers and ordered in a grand feast: roast biloa-bird with wickenberry sauce, rag-fish, candied sea-calc, bowls of whelks, corpentine, hemmer garnished with that choice purple-black seaweed known as livret, a profusion of cakes, tarts and jellies, and jugs of edel wine.

To the feast Ghyl invited Floriel, who had no father and whose ribald mother had refused to take note of

the occasion. The two lads gorged themselves on delicacies while Amiante picked at this and tasted that.

Somewhat to Ghyl's annoyance Floriel, immediately after the meal, began to show signs of restlessness and hinted that best he should be on his way.

"What?" exclaimed Ghyl. "The sun's hardly down on the afternoon. Stay on for supper."

"Supper, bah; I'm so stuffed I can't move . . . Well, to tell the truth, Nion spoke of a little get-together at a place we know and made sure that I'd be on hand. Why don't you come along as well?"

"I'd fear to go to a house where I wasn't invited."

Nion smiled mysteriously. "Don't trouble yourself on that score. Nion gave orders to bring you along." This latter was transparently a fabrication, but Ghyl, after half a dozen mugs of wine, felt rather in a mood for further celebration. He looked across the room to where Amiante was assisting the victualler in the repacking of pots, pans and trays. "I'll see what my father has in mind."

Amiante made no objection to the outing, so Ghyl arrayed himself in new plum-colored breeches, a black coat with scarlet sculptury, a jaunty black hat with the rim aslant. In his new clothes Ghyl felt that he cut a passably fine figure, and Floriel made no bones about endorsing his opinion. "That's an absolutely smashing outfit; beside you I look a frump! . . . Oh well, we can't all be rich and handsome. Come along then; the sun is down in the west and we don't want to miss any fun."

To mark the occasion they rode Overtrend south through Hoge and into Cato. They surfaced and walked east into a district of peculiar old houses of stone and black brick which by some freak had stood against the last devastation.

Ghyl was puzzled. "I thought Nion lived across Hoge, toward Foelgher."

"Who said we were going to his house?"

"Where are we going then?"

Floriel made a cryptic sign. "In a moment you'll see." He led the way along a dank alley smelling of the ages, through a gate on which hung a lantern with green and purple bulbs, into a tavern which occupied the whole ground floor of one of the old houses.

From a table across the room Mael Villy raised a call. "There's Floriel, and Ghyl as well! Over here, this way!"

They crossed to where their friends had been making free with ale and wine, found seats and had mugs pressed into their hands. Nion Bohart proposed a toast: Here's a pimple on the tongue of Honson Ospude, sore feet for all the Guide Leapers: may they try the Double Sincere Eight-Nine Swing, fall flat and slide to rest with their noses upon Animal Corruption!"

With bravos and catcalls the group drank the toast. Ghyl took occasion to inspect his surroundings. The room was very large, with carved posts supporting an elegant old ceiling of green sapodilla and yellow tile. The walls were stained dull scarlet, the floor was stone. Light came from four candelabra

supporting dozens of little lamps. Sitting in an alcove an orchestra of three men, with zither, flute and tympany, played jigs and reels. Below the orchestra twenty young women lolled on a long couch, wearing a variety of costumes, some flamboyant, others severe, but all characterized by an element of fantasy, setting them apart from the ordinary women of Ambroy. At last Ghyl fully realized where he was: in one of the quasi-legal taverns offering wine and food, music and good cheer, and also the services of a staff of hostesses. Ghyl looked curiously along the line of girls. None were particularly comely, he thought, and a few were actually grotesque, with garments of incredible complication and cosmetics all but concealing their faces.

"See any you fancy?" Nion Bohart called over to Ghyl. "They're all here tonight. Business is poor. Pick out the one you favor; she'll tingle your toes for you!"

Ghyl shook his head to indicate disinclination, and looked around the other tables.

"What do you think of the place?" Floriel asked him.

"It's splendid, certainly. But isn't it very expensive?"

"Not so much as you might think, if you drink only ale and stay away from the girls."

"Too bad old Honson Ospude isn't here, eh, Nion?" called Shulk Odlebusch. "We'd pour him so full he wouldn't know up from down!"

"I'd like to see him tackle that fat woman!" remarked Uger Harspitz with a lecherous grin. "Her with

the green feather neck-piece. What a tussle that would be!"

Into the room came three men and two women, the men somewhat cautious of step and gaze, the women by contrast bold, even insolent. Nion nudged Floriel, muttered into his ear and Floriel in turn spoke to Ghyl: "Noncups: those five just taking a table."

Ghyl stared in surreptitious fascination at the five men and women, who, after quick glances into all corners, were now relaxing into their chairs.

Ghyl asked Floriel, "Are they criminals—or just ordinary non-recipients?"

Floriel put the inquiry to Nion, who replied tersely, with a flicker of a cynical grin. Floriel reported to Ghyl: "He doesn't know for sure. He thinks they deal in 'scrap': old metal, old furniture, old artware—probably anything else they lay their hands on."

"How does Nion know all this?" asked Ghyl.

Floriel shrugged. "He knows all sorts of things. I think his brother is a noncup—or was. I'm not really sure. The folk who own this tavern are noncups too, for that matter."

"What of *them*?" Ghyl nodded to the girls on the long bench.

Floriel put a question to Nion, received a reply. "They're all recipients. They belong to the Matrons, Nurses and Service Workers' Guild."

"Oh."

"On occasion lords come in here," said Floriel. "Last time I was here with Nion there were two lords and two ladies, drinking ale and chewing pickled skauf like longshoremen."

"Not really!"

"Really and absolutely," stated Nion who had hitched around to join the conversation. "There may be lords in tonight, who knows? Here, old fellow, fill your mug—good strong ale!"

Ghyl allowed his mug to be replenished. "Why would lords and ladies come down to a place of this sort?"

"Because here is life! Excitement! Real people! Not flat-nosed voucher-douchers!"

Ghyl gave his head a marveling shake. "I thought that when they dropped to the ground they always flew to Luschein or the Mang Islands, or someplace out of Fortinone for their fun!"

"True. But sometimes it's as easy to drop down to good old Keecher's Inn. Anything to escape the boredom of the eyries, I suppose."

"Boredom'?" Ghyl tested the word.

"Certainly. You don't think the life of the lords is all Gade wine and star travel, do you? A good many of them find time hanging heavy on their hands."

Ghyl considered this novel perspective regarding the life of the lords. What with air-boats to sweep them here and there, not only to Luschein and the Mangs, but to Minya-judos, or the wild Para Islands, or the Wewar Glaciers, the idea was not wholly convincing. Still—who could say? "Do they come without Garrion?"

"As to that I don't know. You'll never see Garrion here in the tavern. Perhaps they watch from behind that lattice yonder."

"So long as it's not a Special Agent," suggested Mael Villy with a glance over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, they know you're here," said Nion Bohart. "They know everything."

Ghyl grinned. "Maybe the Garion and Welfare Agents sit together behind the screen."

Nion Bohart spat upon the floor. "Not much. The agents come to play with the girls, like all the rest."

"The lords too?" asked Ghyl.

"The lords? Ha! You should see them. *And* the ladies! They vie in lechery!"

"Have you heard of Lord Mornune the Spay?" asked Uger Harspitz. "How he inveigled my cousin's fiancée? It was at a place up the Insse—some resort. Bazen? Grigglesby Corners? I forget the name—anyway my cousin was called aside on a false message and when he returned Lord Mornune was with the girl, and next morning she never appeared for breakfast. She wrote that she was well, that Mornune was taking her traveling, to the Five Worlds and beyond. Isn't that the life?"

"All one needs is 1.18%," said Nion Bohart grimly. "If I had it I'd inveigle the girls no less."

"You could try with your one voucher and eighteen checks," suggested Shulk Odelbush. "Inquire of that fat one with the green neck-piece."

"Bah. Not even one check . . . But hello! Here's my friend Auger Wermarch. Hi Auger! This way! Meet my friends!"

Auger Wermarch was a young man dressed in the most extreme style, with pointed white shoes and

a black-tasseled yellow hat. Nion Bohart introduced him to the group: "A noncup is Auger and proud of the fact!"

"Right and correct!" declared Auger Wermarch. "They can call me Chaoticist, thief, pariah—anything they want—so long as they don't put me on their damned welfare rolls!"

"Sit, Auger—drink a mug of ale! There's a good fellow!"

Auger pulled a stool up under his splendid shanks and accepted a mug of ale. "A merry life to all!"

"And sand in the eyes of all the water-watchers!" proposed Nion. Ghyl drank with the rest. When Auger Wermarch turned away, he asked Floriel for an explanation. Floriel gave back a significant wink, and Ghyl suddenly understood the reference to 'water-watchers'; those Welfare Agents who patrolled the shoreline to apprehend smugglers of duplicated items, cheap elsewhere but hand-made and expensive in Fortinone. So here was a smuggler: an anti-social leech and bloodsucker—so Ghyl had learned at Guild meetings.

Ghyl gave a silent shrug. Perhaps. Smuggling violated Welfare Regulations, just as Amiante's duplicating had done. On the other hand Amiante had not been motivated by profit. Amiante was hardly an anti-social leech, certainly no blood-sucker. Ghyl sighed, shrugged once more. Tonight he would withhold all judgments.

Perceiving the jug to be empty, Ghyl provided replenishment, and filled mugs all around the table. Then he sat back to watch the events of the evening.

Two other young men came to speak to Auger Wermarch, and presently drew up chairs. Ghyl was not introduced. Sitting at the far end of the table, he was somewhat removed from the node of conversation, which suited him well enough. His head was becoming light, and he decided to drink no more ale. It might be a good idea to think about leaving for home. He spoke to Floriel, who looked at him with a vacant face, mouth looped in a loose grin. Floriel was drunk, in a facile ready fashion that suggested long habit. Floriel said something about hiring girls, but Ghyl had no enthusiasm for the project. Particularly so used and forlorn a set of drabs as these. He said as much to Floriel, who recommended that Ghyl drink a mug or two more ale. Ghyl pulled a wry face.

He was preparing to leave, when at the other end of the table he noted tension. Auger Wermarch was speaking from the corner of his mouth to his two friends; surreptitiously they studied a group of four somberly dressed men who had just entered: Welfare Specials. This was clear even to Ghyl. Nion Bohart sat looking interestedly into his mug of ale, but Ghyl saw his hand flicker under the table.

Events moved with great swiftness. The Welfare Specials approached the table. Auger Wermarch and his two friends sprang away, tumbled over two of the agents, ran for the door and were gone, almost before the mind could appreciate the fact. Nion Bohart and Shulk Odlebush rose to their feet in outrage. "What does this mean?"

"What does it mean, indeed?" said one of the Special Agents drily. "It means that three men have departed the premises without our permission."

"Why shouldn't they?" demanded Nion hotly. "Who are you?"

"Welfare Agents, Special Department—who do you suppose?"

"Well then," said Nion virtuously, "why didn't you say so? You came in so furtively my friends considered you criminals and decided to leave."

"Come along," said the agent. "All of you. Certain questions must be answered. And if you please," he told Nion Bohart, "be so good as to pick up the parcel you threw to the floor and hand it to me."

The group was marched to a wagon and conveyed to the Hoge Detention Center.

Ghyl was released two hours later. He was questioned only cursorily; he told the precise truth and was instructed to go home. Floriel, Mael Villy and Uger Harspitz were released with warnings. Nion Bohart and Shulk Odlebush, with parcels of contraband material in their possession, were required to expiate their anti-social behaviour. Their Base Stipends were diminished by ten vouchers a month; they were obliged to work two months on the Cheer and Cleanliness Walkabout Squad, removing rubbish from the streets, and they were enjoined to one day a week of intensive Temple exercises.

Chapter 8

Undle Square was cool and absolutely quiet when Ghyl arrived home. Damar, a thin sickle, hung low, backlighting the featureless

black hulks to the east. No light showed; the air was cool and fresh; the only sound to be heard was the scrape of Ghyl's footsteps.

He let himself into the workroom. The odor of wood and finishing oil came to his nostrils: so familiar and secure and redolent of everything that he loved that tears came to his eyes.

He stopped to listen, then climbed the stairs.

Amiante was not asleep. Ghyl undressed, then went over to his father's bed and described the events of the evening. Amiante made no comment. Ghyl, peering vainly through the dark, was unable to sense his opinion of the scrape. Amiante finally said, "Well then, go to bed; you've done no harm and suffered none; you've learned a great deal: so we must count the night a success."

Somewhat cheered, Ghyl laid himself down on his couch, and fell asleep from sheer weariness.

He woke to Amiante's hand on his shoulder. "The Welfare Agent is here to discuss the events of last night."

Ghyl dressed, washed his face in cold water, combed back his hair. Descending to the second floor, he found Schute Cobol and Amiante sitting at the table, drinking tea, apparently on a basis of courtesy and good-fellowship, though Schute Cobol's mouth was even tighter and paler than usual and his eyes had a far-off glint. He greeted Ghyl with a curt nod and a glance of careful appraisal, as if he found himself face to face with a stranger.

The discussion began on a note of polite restraint, with Schute Cobol

asking only for Ghyl's version of last night's events. Presently his questions became keener and his comments cutting; Ghyl became angry rather than abject. "I have told you the truth! To the best of my knowledge I did nothing irregular; why do you imply that I am chaotic?"

"I imply nothing. You are the one who draws inferences. Certainly you have been irresponsible in your friendships. This fact, coupled with your previous lack of orthodoxy, compels me to an open mind, rather than the truth I automatically extend to the typical recipient."

"In this case, not enjoying your trust, it is pointless for me to say more. Why waste my breath?"

Schute Cobol's mouth tightened; he looked toward Amiante. "And you, Rt. Tarvoke—you must realize that you have been remiss as a father. Why have you not inculcated in your son a more abiding respect for our institutions? I believe that you have been reproached on this score before."

"Yes, I recall something of the sort," said Amiante with the ghost of a smile.

Schute Cobol became even more brittle than before. "Will you answer my question then? Remember, on you rests the ultimate responsibility for these sad events. Truth is what a father owes to his son, not evasion and ambiguity."

"Ah, truth indeed!" mused Amiante. "If only we could identify truth when we perceived it! Here would be reassurance!"

Schute Cobol snorted in disgust. "This is the source of all our difficulties. Truth is orthodoxy, what

else? You need no reassurance beyond the Regulations."

Amiante rose to his feet, stood with his hands behind his back, looking from the window. "Once there lived the hero Emphyrio," said Amiante. "He spoke such truth that monsters halted to hear him. Did he, I wonder, expound Welfare Agency Regulations through his magic tablet?"

Schute Cobol also rose to his feet. He spoke in a voice passionless and rigidly formal. "I have carefully explained what the Welfare Agency expects in return for the benefits you derive. If you wish to continue to derive these benefits, you must obey Regulations. Do you have any questions?"

"No."

"No."

Schute Cobol gave a curt bow. He went to the door and, turning, said, "Even Emphyrio, were he alive today would be obliged to obey Regulations. There can be no exceptions." He departed.

Amiante and Ghyl followed him down to the workroom. Ghyl slumped upon his bench, put his chin on his hands. "I wonder if this is true? Would Emphyrio obey Welfare Regulations?"

Amiante seated himself at his own bench. "Who knows? He would find no enemy, no tyranny—only inefficiency and perhaps speculation. No question but what we work hard for very little return."

"He would hardly be a noncup," mused Ghyl. "Or would he? One who worked hard and honestly, but off the Welfare Rolls?"

"Possibly. He might choose to be

elected Mayor of the City, and try to increase everyone's stipend."

"How could he do that?" asked Ghyl with interest.

Amiante shrugged. "The Mayor has no real power—although the Charter names him the city's chief executive. He could at least demand higher prices for our goods . . . He could urge that we build factories to produce things we need but now import."

"That would mean duplication."

"Duplication is not inherently wrong, so long as it does not diminish our reputation for craftsmanship."

Ghyl shook his head. "The Welfare Agency would never permit it."

"Perhaps not. Unless Emphyrio were, in fact, Mayor."

"Someday," said Ghyl, "I will learn the rest of the tale. We will know what happened."

Amiante gave his head a skeptical shake, as if his thoughts had many times coursed the same road. "Perhaps. But more likely Emphyrio is legend after all."

Ghyl sat brooding. Presently he asked, "Is there no way we could learn the truth?"

"Probably not in Fortinone. The Historian would know."

"Who is the Historian?"

Amiante, becoming uninterested in the conversation, began to strop one of his chisels. "On a far planet, so I am told, the Historian chronicles all the events of human history."

"The history of Halma and Fortinone, as well?"

"Presumably."

"How would such information

reach the Historian?"

Amiante, bending over the screen, plied his chisel. "No difficulty there. He would employ correspondents."

"What a curious idea!" remarked Ghyl.

"Curious indeed."

Across Undle Square, a few steps up Gosgar Alley to a door with a blue hourglass painted on the panel, up four flights of steps to a pleasant little penthouse: here was the home of Sonjaly Rathe and her mother. Sonjaly was a small slight girl, extremely pretty, with blonde hair and innocent gray eyes. Ghyl thought her enchanting. Unfortunately Sonjaly was something of a flirt, well aware of her charms, always ready with a provocative pout, or a clever tilt of the head.

One afternoon Ghyl sat with Sonjaly at the Campari Cafe trying to make earnest conversation, to which Sonjaly would only give back pert irrelevancies, when who should appear but Floriel. Ghyl frowned and slumped back in his seat.

"Your father told me you'd probably be here," said Floriel, dropping into a chair. "What's that you're drinking? Pomardo? None for me. Waitress, a flask of edel wine, please: the Amanour White."

Ghyl performed introductions. Floriel said, "I suppose you've heard the news."

"News? A mayor's election in two months. I've finished a new screen. Sonjaly thinks she'll change from the Marble Polishers to the Cakes, Tarts and Pastry-Makers."

"No, no," complained Floriel. "I mean *news*! Nion Bohart is free of

the Cheer Squad. He wishes to celebrate, and has called for a party tonight!"

"Oh indeed?" Ghyl frowned down into his goblet.

"Indeed. At the Twisted Willow Palace, if you know of it."

"Naturally," said Ghyl, not wishing to appear stupid in front of Sonjaly.

"It's in Foegher Precinct, on the estuary—but then I'd better take you; you'd never find your way."

"I'm not certain of going," said Ghyl. "Sonjaly and I—"

"She can come too; why not?" Floriel turned to Sonjaly, who was practicing her most outrageous beguilements. "You'd enjoy the Twisted Willow; it's a delightful old place, with a marvelous view. The most interesting and clever folk go there, and many noncups. Even lords and ladies: on the sly, of course."

"It sounds delightful! I'd so like to go!"

"Your mother would object," Ghyl stated more gruffly than he intended. "She'd never allow you to such a tavern."

"She doesn't need to know," declared Sonjaly with a sauciness Ghyl found astonishing. "Also, as it happens, she works tonight, catering a guild banquet."

"Good! Fine! Excellent! No problems whatever," declared Floriel heartily. "We'll all go together."

"Oh very well," said Ghyl crossly. "I suppose we must."

Sonjaly drew up her shoulders. "Indeed! If you find my company so disturbing, I need not go."

"No, no, of course not!" protested

Ghyl. "Do not misunderstand!"

"I misunderstand nothing," declared the outrageous Sonjaly. "And I'm sure Rt. Huzsuis would tell me the location of the Twisted Willow Palace, so that I might find my own way through the dark."

"Don't be ridiculous!" snapped Ghyl. "We'll all go together."

"That's better."

Ghyl brushed his plum-colored breeches, steamed and pressed the jacket, inserted new stiffeners into his boots, polishing to a glitter the articulated bronze greave. With a side-glance toward Amiante—who maintained a studious disinterest—he fixed to his knees a pair of black ribbon rosettes, with streaming ends, then pomaded his golden-brown hair almost dark. With another quick glance toward Amiante, he teased the ends, where they hung over his ears into gallant upturned curls.

Floriel was unflatteringly surprised at Ghyl's elegance. He himself wore an easy graceful suit of dark green, with a soft black velvet cap. Together they went to the house with the blue hourglass on Gosgar Alley. Sonjaly anticipated their knock and cautioned them to silence. "My mother is still home. I've told her I'm out to visit Gedée Anstrut. Go to the corner and wait."

Five minutes later she was with them, somewhat breathlessly, her face more charming than ever for its mischief. "Perhaps we can take Gedée with us; she's very jolly and she'd love a party. I don't think she's ever been to a tavern. No more than I, of course."

Ghyl grudgingly assented to Gedée's

presence, although it would void all hope of a private hour or two with Sonjaly. She also would impose a strain on his none-too-plentiful wallet, unless Floriel could be persuaded to act as her escort—a dubious hope, since Gedée was tall and spare, with a keen beak of a nose and an unfortunately sparse head of coarse black hair, which she wore in symmetrical fore and aft shingles.

Still Sonjaly had proposed and if Ghyl disposed, she would pout. Gedée Anstrut eagerly assented to the party and Floriel, as Ghyl had assumed, quickly made it clear that he did not intend to participate in Gedée's entertainment.

The four rode Overtrend to South Foelgher, only a few yards from Hyalis Park. They climbed a little hill: an outcropping of the same ridge which further north in Veige became Dunkum's Heights. But here the river was close below, reflecting the tawny violet, gold and orange dust of the sunset. The Twisted Willow Palace was close at hand—a rickety structure open to the air in warm weather, screened and shuttered when the wind blew. The specialty of the house was grilled mud-eel, esperges in spice-sauce, and a pale light wine from the coastal region south of Ambroy.

Nion Bohart had not yet arrived; the four found a table. A waiter approached, and it developed that Gedée was tremendously hungry, having not yet dined. Ghyl watched glumly while she devoured vast quantities of eel and esperges. Floriel mentioned that he hoped to build or buy a small sailing craft, and Sonjaly declared herself keenly interested in sailboats and travel in

general, and the two became involved in a spirited conversation, while Ghyl sat to the side dispiritedly watching Gedée attack the platter of eel which he had ordered for Sonjaly, but which she now decided she didn't care for.

Nion Bohart arrived, in company with a somewhat overdressed young woman a year or two his senior. Ghyl thought to recognize her as one of the girls who had sat on the bench at Keecher's Inn. Nion introduced her as 'Marta', without reference to her guild. A moment later Shulk and Uger arrived, and presently Mael Villy, escorting a girl of rather coarse appearance, far from inconspicuous by reason of flaming red hair. As if to emphasize her disdain for orthodoxy, she wore a tight sheathe of black fishskin which concealed few, if any, of her bodily contours. Sonjaly raised her eyebrows in disparagement; Gedée, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, stared blankly, but seemed to care nothing one way or the other.

Pitchers of wine were brought; goblets were filled and emptied. Evening became night. Colored lanterns were lit; a lutist purportedly from the Mang Islands played lilt-ing Mang Island love songs.

Nion Bohart was strangely taciturn. Ghyl suspected that his experience had chastened him, or at least had made him less flamboyant. But after a goblet or two of wine, a glance toward the door, a quick look at Sonjaly, Nion hitched his chair forward and became something like his old self: grim and cynical, yet easy and expansive and gay, all at once. To Ghyl's relief

Shulk Odlebush engaged Gedée in conversation and went so far as to pour her goblet full of wine. Ghyl moved his chair closer to Sonjaly, who was laughing at something Floriel had said, and turned Ghyl an unseeing glance, as if he were not there. Ghyl took a deep breath, opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, and sat back sulking.

Now Nion was speaking, telling of his experience at the Welfare Agency. Everyone quieted to listen. He told of how he had been conveyed to the office, of his questioning, of the stern injunctions against further trafficking with smugglers. He had been warned that the charge of his rod was high, that he risked rehabilitation. Gedée, chewing on the last of the esperges, asked, "Something I've never understood: the noncups aren't recipients, so they aren't on the Welfare Rolls and they don't have deportment rods. Well then—can a noncup be rehabilitated?"

"No," said Nion Bohart. "If he is determined a criminal he is expelled, over one of the four frontiers. A simple vagrant is expelled east into Bayron. A smuggler fares worse and is expelled into the Alkali Flats. The worst criminals are expelled into the first two inches of Bauredel. The Special Investigator explained all this to me. I told him I wasn't a criminal, that I had committed no great wrong; he said I had disobeyed the Regulations. I told him that maybe the Regulations should be changed, but he refused to laugh."

"Isn't there a way to change Regulations?" asked Sonjaly.

"I've no idea," said Nion Bohart.

"I suppose the Chief Supervisor does what he thinks best."

"Strange, in a way," said Floriel. "I wonder how it ever started."

Ghyl leaned forward. "In the old days Thadeus was the capitol of Fortinone. The Welfare Department was a branch of the state government. When Thadeus was destroyed there wasn't any more government, and there wasn't anyone to change Welfare Department Regulations. So there never was change."

Everyone turned now to look at Ghyl. "Eh, then," said Nion Bohart. "Where did you learn all this?"

"From my father."

"Well, if you're so knowing, how are regulations changed?"

"There's no state government. The Mayor headed the city government until the Welfare Department made a city government unnecessary."

"The Mayor can't do anything," grumbled Nion Bohart. "He's just the custodian of city documents: a nonentity."

"Come now!" cried Floriel in mock outrage. "I'll have you know the Mayor is my mother's second cousin. He is bound to be a gentleman!"

"At the least he can't be expelled or rehabilitated," said Ghyl. "If a man like Emphyrio were elected—the elections, incidentally, are next month—he might insist on the provisions of the Ambroy City Charter, and the Welfare Department would have to obey."

"Ha ha!" chuckled Mael Villy. "Think of it! All the stipends raised!

Agents cleaning the streets and delivering parcels!"

"Who can be elected mayor?" asked Floriel. "Anyone?"

"Naturally," jeered Nion. "Your mother's cousin managed to land the job."

"He is a very distinguished man!" protested Floriel.

Ghyl said, "Generally the Council of Guildmasters nominate one of their elders. He is always elected and then re-elected and usually holds the job till he dies."

"Who was Emphyrio?" asked Gedée. "I've heard the name."

"A mythical hero," said Nion Bohart. "Part of the interstellar folklore."

"Perhaps I'm stupid," said Gedée with a determined grin, "but where is the advantage in electing a mythical hero mayor? What is gained?"

"I didn't say we should elect Emphyrio," explained Ghyl. "I said a man *like* Emphyrio would perhaps insist upon changes."

Floriel was becoming drunk. He laughed rather foolishly. "I say, elect Emphyrio, mythical hero or not!"

"Right!" called Mael. "Elect Emphyrio. I'm all for it!"

Gedée wrinkled her nose in disapproval. "I still can't see what would be gained."

"Nothing real is gained," Nion Bohart explained. "It just becomes a bit of nonsense: tomfoolery, if you like. A thumb to the nose toward the Welfare Agency."

"It seems silly to me," sniffed Gedée. "A childish prank."

It only needed Gedée's disappro-

val to stimulate Ghyl's endorsement. "If nothing else, the recipients might become aware that existence is more than waiting for welfare vouchers!"

"Right!" exclaimed Nion Bohart. "Well spoken, Ghyl! I had no idea you were such a firebrand!"

"I'm not, really . . . Still, the ordinary recipient could stand a bit of stimulation."

"I still think it's silly," snorted Gedée, and seizing her goblet, turned a great gulp of wine down her throat.

Floriel said, "It's something to do, at least. How does one go about becoming mayor?"

"Peculiarly," said Nion Bohart, "I can answer that, even though my mother has no cousins. It is very simple. The Mayor himself is in charge of the election, since, in theory, the office is outside the province of the Welfare Department. A candidate must pay a bond of a hundred vouchers to the Mayor, who then is required to post his name on the bulletin board in the Municipal Parade. On election day, all who wish to vote go to the Parade, inspect the names on the bulletin board and announce their choice to a scrivener who keeps a tally."

"So then, all that is needed is a hundred vouchers," said Floriel. "I'm good for ten."

"What?" giggled Sonjaly. "You'd put your mother's cousin from his job?"

"He's a dim-witted old mountebank. Not a month ago he walked past my mother and me as if he

failed to see us. In fact, I'll pledge fifteen vouchers!"

"I wouldn't give a tainted check," sniffed Gedée. "It's ridiculous, and childish, to boot. It might even be irregularatory."

"Put me down for ten," Ghyl immediately declared. "Or fifteen, for that matter."

"I'll give five," said Sonjaly, with a mischievous glance toward Nion Bohart.

Shulk, Mael and Uger all volunteered ten vouchers and the two girls who had come with Nion and Shulk laughingly promised five vouchers each.

Nion sat looking from face to face with hooded eyes and a half-smile. "As I count it, the pledges come to seventy-five vouchers. Very well, I'll go twenty-five, to make up the hundred, and what's more I'll take the money to the Mayor."

Gedée sat up straight in her chair and muttered something into Sonjaly's ear, who frowned and made an impatient sign.

Floriel filled goblets all around and proposed a toast. "To the election of 'Emphyrio' as Mayor!"

Everyone drank. Then Ghyl said, "Another matter! Suppose, by some fantastic chance, that 'Emphyrio' is elected? What then?"

"Bah! No such thing will happen," retorted Nion Bohart. "And what if it did? It might set people to thinking."

"People had best be thinking of how to behave themselves," declared Gedée stiffly. "I think the whole idea is beastly."

"Oh come now, Gedée," said

Floriel. "Don't be so hoity-toity! What's a little jollity, after all?"

Gedée spoke to Sonjaly, "Don't you think it about time we were going home?"

"Why the rush?" demanded Floriel. "The party is just beginning!"

"Of course!" echoed Sonjaly. "Come now, Gedée, don't fret. We can't go home so early! Our friends would think we were ridiculous."

"Well, I want to go home."

"And I don't!" snapped Sonjaly. "So there!"

"I can't go by myself," said Gedée. "This is a very boisterous part of town." She rose to her feet and stood waiting.

Ghyl muttered, "Oh very well. Sonjaly, we'd better leave."

"But I don't want to leave. I'm having a good time. Why don't you take Gedée home, then come back?"

"What? By the time I got back here everyone else will be ready to leave!"

"Hardly, my boy," said Nion Bohart. "This is a celebration! We're good for the whole night! In fact, from here we'll presently move on to a place I know, where we'll meet some other friends."

Ghyl turned to Sonjaly. "Wouldn't you like to come along? We could talk along the way . . ."

"Really, Ghyl! It's such a little matter, and I'm having fun!"

"Oh very well." Ghyl said to Gedée, "Come along."

"What a coarse crowd!" declared Gedée, as soon as they had left the tavern. "I thought things were to be nicer; otherwise I never would have come. I believe your friends are all noncups! They should be reported."

"They're nothing of the sort," said Ghyl. "No more than I myself."

Gedée gave a meaningful snort and said nothing more.

Back to Brueben Precinct they rode, then walked to Undle Square, across to Gosgar Alley and Gedée's home. She opened the door and looked back at Ghyl with a coy gap-toothed grin. "Well then, we're here, and well away from that disreputable crowd. Not Sonjaly, of course, who is simply spoiled and perverse . . . Would you care to come in? I'll brew a nice pot of tea. After all, it isn't too late."

"Thank you, no," said Ghyl. "I had better be returning to the party."

Gedée closed the door smartly in his face. Ghyl turned and marched back across Undle Square. In the workshop a dim light burned; Amiante would be carving at a screen or poring over an old document. Ghyl slowed his steps, and wondered if his father would like to come to the party. Probably not . . . But, as he crossed the square, he looked several times back over his shoulder at the lonely light behind the amber glass panes.

Back to the Overtrend, back to South Foelgher, up the ridge to the Twisted Willow Palace. To Ghyl's dismay the lights were turned down; the tavern was empty save for the janitor and the waiter.

Ghyl went to the waiter. "The party I was with, at that table yonder—did they say where they were going?"

"No, sir; not to me. They were all jolly and laughing; much wine they'd been drinking. I'm sure I don't know."

Ghyl walked slowly back down

the hill. Would they have gone to Keecher's Inn in Cato? Unlikely. Ghyl gave a hollow laugh, and set out afoot across the dark echoing streets of Foelgher: past stone warehouses and huts of ancient black brick. Fog blew in off the estuary, creating moist auras around the infrequent street lamps. Finally, gloomy and sagging of shoulder, he tramped into Undle Square. He halted, then slowly crossed to Gosgar Alley and proceeded to the door with the blue hourglass. Sonjaly lived on the fourth floor. The windows were dark. Ghyl sat on the step and waited. Half an hour passed. Ghyl heaved a sigh, rose to his feet. She probably had come in long ago. He went home and put himself in bed.

Chapter 9

The next morning Ghyl roused himself to find Amiante already up and busy. He washed and dressed in his work smock and went below to his breakfast.

"Well then," asked Amiante, "how did the party go?"

"Nicely. Have you ever heard of the Twisted Willow Palace?"

Amiante nodded. "A pleasant place to visit. Do they still serve mud-eel and esperges?"

"Yes." Ghyl sipped his tea. "Nion Bohart was at the party, and Floriel, and several others from the special class at the Temple."

"Ah, yes."

"You know that there is a mayoralty election next month?"

"I hadn't thought of it. I suppose it's about time."

"We spoke of raising a hundred

vouchers and putting up the name 'Emphyrio' to be voted upon."

Amiante raised his eyebrows. He sipped his tea. "The Welfare Agents will not be amused."

"Is it any of their affair?"

"Anything which concerns the recipients is Welfare Department's affair."

"But what can they do? It is certainly not irregularatory to propose a name for mayor!"

"The name of a dead man, a legend."

"Is this irregularatory?"

"Technically and formally, I would think not, since there would seem to be no intent to deceive. If the public wished to elect a legend to the mayor's office . . . Of course, there may be age or residence or other qualifications. If so, then of course the name cannot even be placed on the boards."

Ghyl gave a terse nod. After all, it meant little one way or another . . . He went down to the work-room, honed his chisels and began carving upon his screen—with all the time an eye cocked on the door. Surely there would come a knock, Sonjaly would look in, tearful, meek, to make amends for the previous evening.

No knock. No wan face.

Halfway through the afternoon, with the door open to the amber sunlight, Shulk Odlebush appeared. "Hello, Ghyl Tarvoke. Hard at work then?"

"As you see." Ghyl put down his chisels, swung around on the bench. "What brings you here? Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing whatever. Last night you mentioned fifteen vouchers for

a certain project. Nion asked me to drop by to collect."

"Yes, of course." But Ghyl hesitated. In the full light of day the prank seemed somehow pointless. Even malicious. Or more properly: mocking and jeering. Still, as Amiante had pointed out, if the population wished to vote for a legend, why should the opportunity not be extended to them?

Ghyl temporized. "Where did everyone go from the Twisted Willow?"

"Up-river to a private home. You should have come. Everyone had a wonderful time."

"I see."

"Floriel certainly has good taste in girls." Here Shulk cocked his head to look at Ghyl sideways. "I can't say the same for you. Who was that fearful goat you brought?"

"I didn't bring her. I just had to take her home."

Shulk gave an uninterested shrug. "Give me the fifteen vouchers, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

Ghyl frowned and winced, but could see no help for it. He looked toward his father, half-hoping for some sort of admonition against foolishness, but Amiante seemed oblivious to all.

Ghyl went to a cabinet, counted fifteen vouchers, handed them to Shulk. "Here."

Shulk nodded. "Excellent. Tomorrow to the Municipal Parade and post up our candidate for mayor."

"Who is going?"

"Anyone who wants. Won't it be great? Imagine the fuss!"

"I suppose so."

Shulk gave a casual wave and departed.

Ghyl went to the work bench, seated himself across from Amiante. "Do you think I am acting correctly?"

Amiante carefully put down his chisel. "You certainly are doing no wrong."

"I know—but am I being foolish? Reckless? I can't decide. After all, the mayoralty isn't an important office."

"To the contrary!" declared Amiante with a vehemence which Ghyl found surprising. "The office is specified by the Civic Charter, and is very old indeed." Amiante paused, then gave a soft grunt of disparagement—toward whom or what Ghyl could not divine.

"What can the mayor do?" Ghyl asked.

"He can, or at least he can *try* to enforce the provisions of the Charter." Amiante frowned up at the ceiling. "I suppose it could be argued that Welfare Regulation effectually supersedes the Charter—though the Charter has never been abrogated. The mayoralty itself testifies to the fact!"

"The Charter is older than Welfare Regulation?"

"Indeed yes. Older and rather more general in scope." Amiante's voice was again dispassionate and reflective. "The mayoralty is the last functional manifestation of the Charter, which is a pity." He hesitated, pursed his lips. "In my opinion the mayor might usefully take it upon himself to assert the principles of the Charter . . . Difficult, I suppose. Yes, difficult indeed."

"Why difficult?" asked Ghyl. "The Charter is still valid?"

Amiante tapped his chin thoughtfully and stared through the open door out into Undle Square. Ghyl began to wonder if Amiante had heard his question.

Amiante at last spoke—obliquely, hyperbolically, so it seemed to Ghyl. "Freedom, privileges, options, must constantly be exercised, even at the risk of inconvenience. Otherwise they fall into desuetude and become unfashionable, unorthodox—finally irregularity. Sometimes the person who insists upon his prerogatives seems shrill and contentious—but actually he performs a service for all. Freedom naturally should never become license; but regulation should never become restriction." Amiante's voice dwindled; he picked up his chisel and examined it as if it were a strange object.

Ghyl frowned. "You think then that I should try to become Mayor and enforce the Charter?"

Amiante smiled, shrugged. "As to this, I can't give advice. You must decide for yourself . . . Long ago I had the opportunity to do something similar. I was dissuaded, and I have never felt completely comfortable since. Perhaps I am not a brave man."

"Of course you're brave!" declared Ghyl. "You're the bravest man I know!"

But Amiante only smiled and shook his head and would say no more.

At noon the following day Nion, Floriel and Shulk came to visit Ghyl. They were excited, keyed-up, alive. Nion, wearing a suit of black

and brown, looked older than his years. Floriel was casually friendly. "What in the world happened to you the other night?" he asked ingeniously. "We waited and waited and waited. Finally we decided that you had gone home, or maybe—" he winked—"had stopped to cuddle a bit with Gedée."

Ghyl turned away in disgust.

Floriel shrugged. "If you want to be that way about it."

Nion said, "There was a minor difficulty. We couldn't register the name 'Emphyrio' for election unless it was attached or affixed to a recipient in residence, of good moral standing. Naturally, just off Cheer and Health Squad, I was out. Floriel and Shulk are in trouble with their guild. Mael was expelled from Temple. Uger—well, you know Uger. He just wouldn't do. So we nominated you, under the cognomen 'Emphyrio'." Nion came forward, slapped Ghyl jovially on the back. "My lad, you may be the next mayor!"

"But—I don't want to be mayor!"

"Realistically, the chances are small."

"Are there no age qualifications? After all—"

Nion shook his head. "You're a full recipient, you're in good standing with your guild, you're not listed by the Temple. In short, you're an acceptable candidate."

From his bench Amiante chuckled; all turned to look at him, but Amiante said no more. Ghyl frowned. He had not wished to become so intimately involved with the program. Especially since, with Nion involved, he had no real control over events. Unless, again, he ex-

erted himself to exercise leadership, which meant contention with Nion, or at the very least, a test of wills.

On the other hand—as Amiante had pointed out—the candidacy was neither irregular nor disreputable. There was no reason whatever why, if he so chose, he should not become a candidate, using the name 'Emphyrio' as a cognomen after clearly identifying himself as 'Ghyl Tarvoke'.

Ghyl said, "I have no objection— if one condition is met."

"What is it?"

"That I am in control of the entire affair. You will have to take orders from me."

"Orders?" Nion's mouth twisted wryly. "Really, now!"

"If you want it otherwise—use your own name."

"As you know, I can't do that."

"Well then, you will have to agree to my conditions."

Nion rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. "Oh well, if you want to be pompous about the situation . . ."

"Call it what you like." From the corner of his eye Ghyl could see that Amiante had been listening intently. Now Amiante's mouth curved in the smallest of smiles and he bent over his screen.

"Do you agree to my conditions?"

Nion grimaced, then smiled, and at once was as before. "Yes, of course. The main thing, of course, is not authority or prestige, but the whole great farcical situation."

"Very well then. I want no noncups or criminals involved, directly or indirectly. The affair must be totally regulationalary."

"Noncups are not necessarily immoral," argued Nion Bohart.

"True," intoned Amiante from his bench.

"But the noncups you know are," Ghyl told Nion, after a look toward his father. "I don't care to be at the mercy of your acquaintances."

Nion drew his lips back, to show, for an instant, sharp white teeth. "You certainly want things your own way."

Ghyl threw up his hands in a gesture of heartfelt relief. "Do without me! In fact—"

"No, no," Nion Bohart cut in. "Do without you—the originator of the whole wonderful scheme? Nonsense! A travesty!"

"Then—no noncups. No statements or expositions or activity of any kind without my prior endorsement."

"But you can't be everywhere at once!"

Ghyl sat for ten seconds looking at Nion Bohart. Just as he opened his mouth to disassociate himself irrevocably from the project, Nion shrugged. "Whatever you say."

Schute Cobol made a heated protest to Amiante. "The idea is absolutely ridiculous! A stripling, a mere lad, among the candidates for mayor! And calling himself 'Emphyrio' to boot! Do you consider this social conduct?"

Amiante asued mildly, "Is it irregular?"

"It is certainly bumptious and improper! You mock an august office! Many people will be disturbed and distracted!"

"If an activity is not irregular, then it is right and proper,"

said Amiante. "If an activity is right and proper, then any recipient may indulge in it to his heart's content."

Schute Cobol's face flushed brick-red with anger. "Do you not realize that you are bringing difficulty, if not censure, down upon me? My superior will ask why I do not control such antics! Very well. Obduracy works both ways. It so happens that the orders for your yearly stipend increases are in my office for discretionary recommendation. I must make a 'Not approved' indication on the basis of social irresponsibility. You gain nothing by affronting me!"

Amiante was unmoved. "Do as you think best."

Schute Cobol swung around to Ghyl. "What is your final word?"

Ghyl, previously the most lukewarm of candidates, could hardly control his voice from outrage. "It is not irregularity. Why should I not become a candidate?"

Schute Cobol flung himself from the shop.

"Bah!" muttered Ghyl. "Maybe Nion and the noncup are right after all!"

Amiante made no direct response. He sat pulling at his little chin, an unimpressive foundation to his massive face. "It is time," said Amiante in a heavy voice.

Ghyl looked at him questioningly, but Amiante was talking to himself. "It is time," he intoned once more.

Ghyl went to his bench, seated himself. As he worked he turned puzzled glances toward Amiante, who sat staring out the open doorway, his mouth occasionally moving

as he made soundless but emphatic utterances to himself. Presently he went to the cabinet and brought forth his portfolio. With Ghyl watching in disquietude, Amiante turned through his papers.

That night Amiante worked late in his shop. Ghyl tossed and turned on his couch, but did not go down to learn what his father was doing.

The following morning a curious sour odor permeated the shop. Ghyl asked no questions; Amiante volunteered no explanation.

During the day Ghyl attended a Guild outing to Pyrite Isle, twenty miles to sea: a little knob of rock with a few wind-beaten trees, a pavilion, a few cottages, a restaurant. Ghyl had hoped that his involvement with the mayoralty campaign—a relatively obscure and unpublicized affair—might escape attention, but such was not the case. All day he was patronized, taunted, inspected covertly, avoided. A few young men and a few girls inquired regarding his eccentric cognomen, his motives, his plans if elected. Ghyl was unable to supply intelligent answers. He did not care to identify his candidacy either as a prank, or a chaoticist ploy, or an act of drunken bravado from which he was unable to disengage himself. At the day's end he felt humiliated and angry. When he arrived home, Amiante was out. In the shop was yet a trace of the sour odor he had noticed that morning.

Amiante did not return home until late, an unusual occurrence.

On the following day it was discovered that throughout the precincts Brueben, Nobile, Foelgher, Dodrechten, Cato, Hoge, Veige and

out into Godero and East Town placards had been posted. In dark brown characters on a gray background a message read:

Let us promote change for the better

EMPHYRIO SHOULD BE OUR
NEXT MAYOR

Ghyl saw the placards with amazement. They clearly had been printed by some manner of duplication; how else to explain the large number of placards?

One of the placards hung on a wall across Undle Square. Ghyl went close to the printing, sniffed the ink, and recognized the sour smell which had permeated the workroom.

Ghyl went to sit on a bench. He looked blankly across the square. A harrowing situation! How could his father be so irresponsible? What perverse motivation could so obsess him?

Ghyl started to rise to his feet, then sank back. He did not want to go home; he did not want to talk to his father . . . And yet, he could not sit on the bench all day.

He pulled himself upright, walked slowly across the square.

Amiante stood at his bench blocking out the pattern for a new screen: a Winged Being plucking fruit from the Tree of Life. The panel was a dark and glossy slab of perdura which Amiante had been saving for this specific design.

Seeing his father so placid Ghyl stopped short in the doorway to stand staring. Amiante looked up, nodded. "So then—the young political aspirant arrives home. How goes the contest?"

"There is no contest," muttered

Ghyl. "I'm sorry I ever agreed to the foolishness."

"Oh? Think of the prestige—assuming of course that you are elected."

"Small chance of that. And prestige? I have more prestige as a wood-carver."

"If you were elected as 'Emphyrio', the situation would be different. The prestige would derive from the extraordinary circumstances."

"'Prestige' or ridicule. More likely the latter. I know nothing about being mayor. It is absurd."

Amiante shrugged, returned to his design. A shadow fell across Ghyl's bench. He turned. As he had feared: Schute Cobol with two men in dark blue and brown uniforms—Special Agents.

Schute Cobol looked from Ghyl to Amiante. "I regret the necessity for this visit. However I can prove that an irregularity process has occurred in this shop, resulting in the duplicated production of several hundred placards."

Ghyl leaned back on his bench. Schute Cobol and the two agents stepped forward. "Either one or both of you are guilty," declared Schute Cobol. "Prepare—"

Amiante stood looking from one to the other in a puzzle fashion. "'Guilt'? In printing political placards? No guilt whatever."

"You printed these placards?"

"I did, certainly. It is my right to do so. There is no guilt involved."

"I choose to think differently, especially after you have been warned. This is a serious offense!"

Amiante held out his hands. "How can it be an offense, when I exercise a right guaranteed by

the Great Charter of Ambroy?"

"Eh then? And what is this?"

"The Great Charter: are you not familiar with it? It provides the basis for all regulation."

"I know nothing of any charter. I know the Welfare Code of Regulations, which is sufficient."

Amiante was more than courteous. "Permit me to show you the passage to which I refer." He went to his cabinet, brought forth one of his ancient pamphlets. "Notice: the Great Charter of Ambroy; surely you are acquainted with it?"

"I have heard of such a thing," Schute Cobol grudgingly admitted.

"Well then, here is the passage. 'Any citizen of virtuous quality and good reputation may aspire to public office; furthermore he and his sponsors may present to public attention notice of such candidacy, by means of advertisement, public posting of printed bulletins or placards, verbal messages and exhortation, on or off of public property . . . ' There is more, but I believe this is sufficient."

Schute Cobol peered at the pamphlet. "What gibberish is this?"

"It is written in Formal Archaic," said Amiante.

"Whatever it is, I can't read it. If I can't read it, it can't bind me. This trash might be anything! You are trying to swindle me!"

"No indeed," said Amiante. "Here is the basic law of Ambroy, to which the Welfare Code and Guild Regulations both must yield."

"Indeed?" Schute Cobol gave a grim chuckle. "And who enforces the law?"

"The Mayor and the people of Ambroy."

Schute Cobol made a brusque motion to the agents. "To the office with him. He has performed irre-gulatory duplicating."

"No, no! I have not done so! Do you not see this passage? It avows my rights!"

"And have I not told you I cannot read it? There are hundreds, thousands, of such obsolete documents. Get along with you! I have no sympathy for Chaoticists!"

Ghyl leapt forward, striking at Schute Cobol. "Let my father alone! He has never done a wrong act!"

One of the agents thrust Ghyl aside, the second tripped him and sent him sprawling. Schute Cobol stood above him with flared nostrils. "Luckily for you, the blow did not strike home; otherwise . . ." He did not finish his sentence. He turned to the agents. "Come along then; to the office with him." And Amiante was hustled away.

Ghyl picked himself up, ran to the door, followed the Welfare Agents to their five-wheeled car.

Amiante looked from the window, his expression strained and wild, but in some curious manner, calm. "Make a representation to the Mayor! Demand that he enforce the Charter!"

"Yes, yes! But will he heed?"

"I don't know. Do what you can."

The agents thrust Ghyl aside; the car departed; Ghyl stood looking after it. Then, ignoring aghast stares of friends and neighbors, he returned to the shop.

He thrust the charter into a folder, took money from the cabinet, ran forth once more to the Undle Overtrend kiosk.

Eventually Ghyl located the May-

or, cousin to Floriel's mother, at the Brown Star Inn. As Ghyl had expected he had never heard of the ancient Charter and squinted at it with less than no interest at all. Ghyl explained the circumstances and implored the Mayor to intervene, but the Mayor shook his head decisively. "The case is clear-cut, or so it seems to me. Duping is prohibited, for good and sufficient reason. Your father seems a capricious sort to violate such an important regulation."

Ghyl glared into the bland face, then turned furiously away and strode through the dusk back to Undle Square.

Once more in the shop he sat brooding for hours as the sepia gloom of twilight became darkness.

At last he stumbled up to bed, to lay staring into nothing, his stomach churning at the thought of what was being done to his father.

Poor innocent Amiante! thought Ghyl. He had trusted the magic of words: a sentence on one of his ancient bits of paper.

But presently, as the night wore on, Ghyl became doubtful. Recalling Amiante's actions of the last few days, Ghyl began to wonder if, after all, Amiante had not done what he felt he had to do, in full cognizance of his risks.

Poor foolish brave Amiante, thought Ghyl.

Amiante was brought home a week and a half later. He had lost weight. He seemed dazed and listless. He came into the shop, and at once went to a bench and sat

down as if his legs were too weak to support him. "Father!" said Ghyl huskily. "Are you well?"

Amiante gave a slow heavy nod. "Yes. As well as can be expected."

"What—did they do?"

Amiante drew a deep breath. "I don't know." He turned to look at his screen, tentatively picked up a chisel in fingers which seemed suddenly blunt and clumsy. "I don't even know why they took me away."

"For printing placards!"

"Ah yes. Now I recall. I read something to them; what was it?"

"This!" cried Ghyl, trying to keep the heartbreak from his voice. "The Great Charter! Do you not remember?"

Amiante picked it up without great interest; turned it this way and that, returned it to Ghyl. "I seem to be tired. I cannot read."

Ghyl took his arm. "Come along upstairs, and lie down. I'll fix supper and we'll talk together."

"I am not very hungry."

Jaunty footsteps sounded along the sidewalk. There was a rap at the door and Nion Bohart, wearing a tall green cap with a pointed bill, a green suit, black and yellow boots, stepped into the shop. At the sight of Amiante he stopped short, then came slowly forward, shaking his head dolefully. "Rehabilitation, eh? I was afraid of that." And he looked down at Amiante as if he were an object of wax. "They showed little restraint I must say."

Ghyl slowly straightened himself, turned to face Nion. "You are the cause of all this."

Nion Bohart stiffened in indignation. "Come now! Let's have no

abuse! I wrote neither the Regulations nor the Great Charter! I've done nothing wrong!"

"Nothing wrong," echoed Amiante in a small clear voice.

Ghyl gave a small skeptical snort. "Well then, what is it you want?"

"I came to discuss the election."

"There is nothing to discuss. I am not interested."

Amiante's mouth moved as if once again he were repeating what he had heard.

Nion Bohart threw his cap to a bench. "Now look here, Ghyl, you're distressed, justifiably. But put the blame where it belongs."

"And where is that?"

Nion Bohart shrugged. "Hard to say." He glanced through the window, made a quick movement as if to depart the room. "More visitors," he muttered.

Into his shop came four men. Only Schute Cobol was known to Ghyl.

Schute Cobol nodded curtly to Ghyl, turned a quick flash of a glance toward Nion Bohart, gave Amiante a grim inspection. "Well then, as a rehabilitate you are entitled to special counsel. This is Zurik Cobol. He will help provide you a healthy new basis of existence."

Zurik Cobol, a small round man with a round bald head, gave a small nod and stared at Amiante intently.

Nion Bohart, as Schute Cobol spoke, had been unobtrusively edging toward the door; but now a sign from a man standing behind Schute Cobol—a tall man in black, with a keen haughty face, wearing a great

black much-beribboned hat, compelled Nion Bohart to remain.

Schute Cobol turned from Amiante toward Ghyl. "Now then, I must inform you that your charge is high. Expert opinion has defined your conduct as verging upon felonious."

"Indeed?" asked Ghyl, a harsh, acid flavor rising in his throat. "Why is this?"

"First: your candidacy is clearly a malicious prank, an attempt to demean the city. Such an attitude is irreverent and intolerable.

"Secondly, you are attempting obfuscation of the Welfare Rolls by naming yourself with the name of a legendary and non-existent man.

"Thirdly, by associating yourself with this legend of rebellion against established order, you implicitly advocate chaoticism.

"Fourthly, you have consorted with noncuperatives—"

Nion Bohart swaggered forward. "And what, may I ask, is irregularity about consorting with non-cups?"

Schute Cobol spared him a glance. "Noncuperatives are beyond Welfare Regulations, hence irregularity, though not actively proscribed. The candidacy of 'Emphyrio' is undoubtedly a noncuperative conception.

"Fifthly, you are the son and associate of a man twice admonished for duplicating. We can not prove collusion, but surely you were aware of what was transpiring. You made no report of the crime. Purposeful failure to report a crime is a felony.

"In none of these five instances is your delinquency definite enough

(Continued on page 82)

THE BIG BOY

BRUCE MC ALLISTER

"If the Big Boy comes tomorrow," Randy Newman asked in one of his songs, "will he like what he sees?" The piece concluded, "Now I've heard it said / that our Big Boy's dead . . . / but I think he's hiding. I think he's hiding."

And what, Bruce McAllister asks, if in our unending explorations of space we should find Him?

"It leaves our ships alone," the starship pilot said, smiling and playing guide for the five Administers of the Faith. "It just sits out there and plays with its solar systems, arranging and re-arranging. Sometimes it pulls planets and stars out of nowhere."

"I wish I could see all of it at once," Rev-Brother Tombayne said, squinting into the azure mass of energy that covered the screen. "I just cannot believe it has a human shape." Tombayne was jostled by Rev-Brother Simms who was trying for a better view of the screen.

"We have a thousand ships around it," the pilot explained. "And those ships have mechanisms for determining the size, energy and movements of the thing out there. It's a human shape alright, and it's about the size of a galaxy, though it certainly doesn't act like one."

Rev-Brother Tombayne stared at the fire in the screen. They were moving rapidly toward it, but it seemed to get no closer. That was

because of its size, so the pilot had explained.

Whatever it is, thought Tombayne, it's frightening. I'm a religion-man, and not supposed to be afraid of things like that. It shows no signs of being an Infernal force; like the pilot says, the humanoid giant out there doesn't bother us when we come snooping; it's pre-occupied with its own playthings and creations. But it's formidable, and I'm weak, so I'm scared.

The "Big Boy" was a fuzzy blue with inexplicable "shadow" area of deep purple—"the real color of space," someone had said—which meant nothing at all to Tombayne. When its arms moved, nothing like muscles or tendons bulged—which *did* make sense. It was human in shape only. No air to breathe, no gravity for it to lift and locomote against. The eyes were a deep purple, just shadows. Hair? Of course not, Tombayne thought, but it did have something that resembled hair. Wisps of energy, star-spangled,

like the tails of comets, were spinning from its head, frantic whips when the Big Boy moved. Breathing? The whole form "breathed," "pulsated"—whatever one wanted to mislabel its physiology. The Big Boy rested in space in a foetal position until it decided to stretch and begin behaving as if it had been struck by a fine idea. Behavior consisted of yawning, pointing, kicking, swatting, spitting. The objects of its movement were often nearby—galaxies rearranged themselves, stars rolled to new positions like marbles, or novaed out of existence. All at the yawn of the thing. As mankind had soon discovered, when nearby cosmic items didn't react to its gesturing, one could be sure that a star or star-cluster somewhere was jumping to the command of its yawn or kick.

Food? The blue lipless mouth of the Big Boy never visibly ingested anything, but a gain of "food value" from its fiddling with galactic energies was not impossible. It would have to be something as subtle as that, since the Big Boy's body was nearly transparent, as if merely a skin, and the ingestion of any matter-as-such would show to Mankind's perceptions. No head, cortex, bladder, any internal organ at all could be discerned in its expanse.

Sex? Tombayne smirked. The poor Big Boy wouldn't have been able to consummate anything human-style. (Well, neither could Rev-Brother Ducas, Tombayne thought—and they call Ducas "human") But perhaps the Big Boy was eternal, needing no propagation of race; besides, it might be having tactile

jollies in its own way, on an awesome scale that would humble man's meager orgasmic pleasures.

"The gismo is about ready, if you're all ready to listen." The smiling mechanic, with the name Smith-soyo, swaggered into the control room, chewing on a stick of Xaxo weed. He blinked into the screen over the shoulders of the five Administrators, and said, "Hey! Do we want to hear what it's got to say or not?"

Everyone turned quickly, nodding, or responding in the affirmative with their eyes and hands.

This is ridiculous, Tombayne thought. They say the thing is talking through emissions of its own energy. A talking galactic giant shaped like a neuter human.

"Now remember, reverend passengers," the smiling mechanic said, leaning over a bright keyboard to the left of the screen, "this machine here isn't the perfect mechanism yet. All we know is that the Big Boy out there is sending some sort of intelligent code at us. This machine comes from the wedding of a mecha-mind and a simple receiver very simple fusion really. If there are any troubles, I'll try to shoot them as quick as possible."

Tombayne wanted to turn to Rev-Brother Simms or Rev-Brother Ducas and intellectualize on the Big Boy—say something about God, Who had created the Big Boy, and the Big Boy who was doing a lot of playing around with the Universe considering the fact that "he" was just a creation "himself." But then, Tombayne admitted, Man's done his

own share of meddling with planets and suns—out of proportion to his Lilliputian body.

Smithsoyo tapped a pattern on the keyboard with his fingers, then stepped back. The Ad-ministers, pilot and mechanic all paid attention both to the bright screen and the flashing keyboard, their heads turning from side to side as though they were watching seven different broi-ball games.

Below the keyboard a slip of paper began oozing out. The mechanic let out a whoop. The paper gradually stopped and Smithsoyo ripped the paper from its slot.

"Damn." Smithsoyo surveyed the message. "A lot of words didn't come out clear."

"Well, hell! Read the damn thing!" Rev-Brother Ducas blurted. Rev-Brother Tombayne turned to him with a surprised look, and Ducas glared back.

"Only six words I can read. They are 'I . . . God . . . you . . . created . . . in . . . worship.'"

There were only three chairs available, but the five Ad-ministers sat down hard. Ducas and Rev-Brother Peotre had to be revived with first aid. Finally the significance of the words sank into Smithsoyo, and he said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"Please don't say that," Ducas moaned, and Tombayne looked at him again.

Simms was being very loud about the whole thing. "I don't like it. Perhaps this is blasphemous, but I just don't like the idea of worshipping that thing out there. It's not, well, it's not the God I imagined." Rev-Brother Peotre snickered.

"No, really, I think he's right." Ducas stood up in the cabin where the five-man religious congress was being held. "It was not meant that we should ever see God, so I don't think we should be condemned for not liking Him when we finally come to see him."

Tombayne, assigned to the keeping of the minutes of the meeting, was already tired of typing capital "H's."

Ducas continued, "We've stumbled onto something no one should see or hear. Perhaps *we've* been automatically damned because of it; I don't know. Only a few thousand people have seen Him, and only the seven of us in this small ship know Who He is. I recommend that we petition to the Tribunals that this area of space—the space including Him—be a restricted area."

Rev-Brother Simms stood up. "I don't know. What—"

"Look, if it isn't made a restricted area, people are going to flock to see Him and listen to His words. Those who had faith before aren't going to afterwards. Looking at this, this thing, our God out there, does something to the human psyche. It's done something to all of us—aversion is the word. If He and His words ever reach the mass of humanity, religion will die post haste. It's best that He be kept a secret."

"Excuse me, Reverend Brother Ducas," Simms resumed. "I wasn't going to oppose your plan, but rather ask what we'll do if He moves. He must be able to move in space by himself."

Ducas hesitated only a moment,

then said with eyes bright, "We'll petition that it be made a capital crime and a Sin to fraternize with Him. The law will say: He who sees the Big Boy must take care not to communicate with him, or stay in the vicinity of him for any length of time."

"What," it was Rev-Brother Peotre's turn now, "will we offer as support for the petition?"

"We'll say that He almost got control of our minds when we tried to communicate. We'll say He wants to assimilate all of us for our life-energy. I don't think He'll mind if we fib a little, in order to keep the faith of his flocks. And we'd better interdict the pilot and the mechanic into silence, somehow."

"Fine" Rev-Brother Simms smiled, and kept saying "fine."

The mechanic stuck his head in and shouted, "I've got the machine fixed now! It'll be clearer now. Do you want to hear more from Big—"

The five Reverend Brothers interrupted him with glares.

The mechanic continued meekly "Do you want to hear more from *Him*?"

Simms, Peotre, Ducas and Timmoteoth smiled in approval. Tombayne moaned silently, his fingers resting on the typewriter keys. Why, he was thinking, in this age of starship and Big—and *God!*—can't I have a decent audio-visual recorder for the minutes of our meetings? Tombayne wanted to type "Anti-Deist Congress No. 1" at the top of the page, but resisted the temptation.

Smithsoyo let his fingers dance across the keyboard again, and the machine gurgled. Paper began to

descend from the slot, and the mechanic's hand was waiting for it when it stopped moving.

The mechanic read seriously to himself, then a smile waxed across his features, then he began laughing. He sat down on the floor, his stomach spasmodically imploding from his laughter. The slip of paper with the "joke" slipped from his fingers, floating to the floor where it lay next to the mechanic's now prostrate, hysterically laughing body.

Rev-Brother Ducas injected the mechanic with a tranquilizer and snapped the paper up from the floor. As he read, his face turned the red of a warning light.

As each man read it, his face matched Ducas'.

Finally Tombayne was handed the paper. It read: "I build for God. You and I are created in God's image. Both of us must worship God. I build for God. You and I are"

Tombayne moaned silently again and looked at Ducas, who was already snapping into action. Rev-Brother Ducas is reknown, Tombayne thought sarcastically, for his presence of mind.

With the other four following—the pilot left to care for the laughter-disabled mechanic—Rev-Brother Ducas hurried to the communications room.

"Can anyone work this?"

Rev-Brother Peotre chuckled and said he could. Sitting down at the transmitter, he flicked on the "juice."

"I want this to be a space-lock-gram, Rev-Brother Peotre—marked urgent," said Rev-Brother Ducas with a dramatically clenched fist.

Peotre activated the proper instruments for transmission of the message through the space-locks.

Tombayne sighed loudly as he listened to Rev-Brother Ducas dictate orders to the Alfa Rondi Missionary-Retreatants. "I want you," Ducas was saying, "to set up a shrine out here by the Big Boy as soon as you arrive. Big Boy is inspiring to religious thought—something along those lines for the ads. And I want . . ."

Ducas was still verbalizing his message when Tombayne slipped from the communications cabin and met Smithsoyo in the corridor. The smile was still dominating his face, but the laughter had waned. Tombayne asked him for a stick of Xaso weed, and the mechanic com-

plied with a knowing wink.

As he chewed it, and as his mind began swirling with fine hallucinations, Rev-Brother Tombayne thought sadly: I should have been like Smithsoyo; it must be easier just to communicate with a talking giant, rather than to try to figure out the spiritual implications of its words. Besides, Smithsoyo laughs. It seems, after thirty years of personal experience, that nothing in religion is allowed to be funny.

The weed allowed Tombayne to laugh for fifteen minutes. Ducas finally discovered him and injected him with a tranquilizer that knocked him like a star under the yawn of the Big Boy.

The End

(Continued from page 77)

to be brought home to you; in this regard you are a subtle young man." (At this, Nion Bohart turned Ghyl a look of searching new appraisal.) "Still, be assured that you deceive no one, that you will be subjected to careful observation. This gentleman—" he indicated the man in black "—is Chief Executive Investigator of Brueben Precinct, a very important person. His interest has been attracted, and from your point of view this is not a propitious circumstance."

"Indeed not," said the official in a light pleasant voice. He pointed to Nion. "This would be one of the accomplices?"

"It is Nion Bohart, a notorious ne'er do well," said Schute Cobol. "I have his dossier at hand. It is not appetizing."

The official made a negligent gesture. "He is warned. We need not proceed further."

The Welfare Agents departed, with the exception of Zurik Cobol, who took Amiante out into the sunlight of the square, seated him on a bench, and spoke earnestly to him.

Nion Bohart looked at Ghyl. "Phew! What a hornet's nest!"

Ghyl went to sit down at his work-bench. "Have I done something terribly wrong? I can't decide . . ."

Nion, finding nothing more to interest him, went to the door. "Election tomorrow," he called over his shoulder. "Don't forget to vote!"

To be concluded

TIME BUM



By C. M. KORNBLUTH

Here is a story that would have delighted Damon Runyon. Even Harry the Horse, that Broadway immortal, would be forced to doff his hat to Harry Twenty-Third Street, the snappy dresser who came up with a completely new con game. For once this story gets around the local hangouts, the wise boys are going to drop their money machines and gold-mine stocks and start buying up lists of subscribers to science-fiction magazines. Yes sir, here's one racket that is sure-fire — provided you're willing to take the chance that the ending to Time Bum is pure fiction.

But God help you if you're wrong!

HARRY Twenty-Third Street suddenly burst into laughter. His friend and sometimes roper Farmer Brown looked inquisitive.

"I just thought of a new con," Harry Twenty-Third Street said, still chuckling.

Farmer Brown shook his head positively. "There's no such thing, my man," he said. "There are only new switches on old cons. What have you

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got — a store con? Shall you be needing a roper?" He tried not to look eager as a matter of principle, but everybody knew the Farmer needed a connection badly. His girl had two-timed him on a badger game, running off with the chump and marrying him after an expensive, month-long buildup.

Harry said, "Sorry, old boy. No details. It's too good to split up. I shall rip and tear the suckers with this con for many a year, I trust, before the details become available to the trade. Nobody, but nobody, is going to call copper after I take him. It's beautiful and it's mine. I will see you around, my friend."

Harry got up from the booth and left, nodding cheerfully to a safeblower here, a fixer there, on his way to the locked door of the hangout. Naturally he didn't nod to such small fry as pickpockets and dope peddlers. Harry had his pride.

The puzzled Farmer sipped his lemon squash and concluded that Harry had been kidding him. He noticed that Harry had left behind him in the booth a copy of a magazine with a space ship and a pretty girl in green bra and pants on the cover.

"A furnished . . . bungalow?" the man said hesitantly, as though he knew what he wanted but wasn't quite sure of the word.

"Certainly, Mr. Clurg," Walter

Lachlan said. "I'm sure we can suit you. Wife and family?"

"No," said Clurg. "They are . . . far away." He seemed to get some secret amusement from the thought. And then, to Walter's horror, he sat down calmly in empty air beside the desk and, of course, crashed to the floor looking ludicrous and astonished.

Walter gaped and helped him up, sputtering apologies and wondering privately what was wrong with the man. There wasn't a chair there. There was a chair on the other side of the desk and a chair against the wall. But there just wasn't a chair where Clurg had sat down.

Clurg apparently was unhurt; he protested against Walter's apologies, saying: "I should have known, Master Lachlan. It's quite all right; it was all my fault. What about the bang — the bungalow?"

Business sense triumphed over Walter's bewilderment. He pulled out his listings and they conferred on the merits of several furnished bungalows. When Walter mentioned that the Curran place was especially nice, in an especially nice neighborhood — he lived up the street himself — Clurg was impressed. "I'll take that one," he said. "What is the . . . feoff?"

Walter had learned a certain amount of law for his real-estate license examination; he recognized the word. "The *rent* is seventy-five

dollars," he said. "You speak English very well, Mr. Clurg." He hadn't been certain that the man was a foreigner until the dictionary word came out. "You have hardly any accent."

"Thank you," Clurg said, pleased. "I worked hard at it. Let me see — seventy-five is six twelves and three." He opened one of his shiny-new leather suitcases and calmly laid six heavy little paper rolls on Walter's desk. He broke open a seventh and laid down three mint-new silver dollars. "There I am," he said. "I mean, there you are."

Walter didn't know what to say. It had never happened before. People paid by check or in bills. They just didn't pay in silver dollars. But it was money — why shouldn't Mr. Clurg pay in silver dollars if he wanted to? He shook himself, scooped the rolls into his top desk drawer and said: "I'll drive you out there if you like. It's nearly quitting-time anyway."

Walter told his wife Betty over the dinner table: "We ought to have him in some evening. I can't imagine where on Earth he comes from. I had to show him how to turn on the kitchen range. When it went on he said, 'Oh, yes — electricity!' and laughed his head off. And he kept ducking the question when I tried to ask him in a nice way. Maybe he's some

kind of a political refugee."

"Maybe . . ." Betty began dreamily, and then shut her mouth. She didn't want Walter laughing at her again. As it was, he made her buy her science-fiction magazines downtown instead of at neighborhood newsstands. He thought it wasn't becoming for his wife to read them. He's so eager for success, she thought sentimentally.

That night, while Walter watched a television variety show, she read a story in one of her magazines. (Its cover, depicting a space ship and a girl in green bra and shorts, had been prudently torn off and thrown away.) It was about a man from the future who had gone back in time, bringing with him all sorts of marvelous inventions. In the end the Time Police punished him for unauthorized time traveling. They had come back and got him, brought him back to his own time. She smiled. It *would* be nice if Mr. Clurg, instead of being a slightly eccentric foreigner, were a man from the future with all sorts of interesting stories to tell and a satchelful of gadgets that could be sold for millions and millions of dollars.

After a week they did have Clurg over for dinner. It started badly. Once more he managed to sit down in empty air and crash to the floor. While they were

brushing him off he said fretfully: "I *can't* get used to not —" and then said no more.

He was a picky eater. Betty had done one of her mother's specialties, veal cutlet with tomato sauce, topped by a poached egg. He ate the egg and sauce, made a clumsy attempt to cut up the meat, and abandoned it. She served a plate of cheese, half a dozen kinds, for dessert, and Clurg tasted them uncertainly, breaking off a crumb from each, while Betty wondered where that constituted good manners. His face lit up when he tried a ripe cheddar. He popped the whole wedge into his mouth and said to Betty: "I will have that, please."

"Seconds?" asked Walter. "Sure. Don't bother, Betty. I'll get it." He brought back a quarter-pound wedge of the cheddar.

Walter and Betty watched silently as Clurg calmly ate every crumb of it. He sighed. "Very good. Quite like —" The word, Walter and Betty later agreed, was *see-mon-joe*. They were able to agree quite early in the evening, because Clurg got up after eating the cheese, said warmly, "Thank you so much!" and walked out of the house.

Betty said, "*What — on — Earth!*"

Walter said uneasily, "I'm sorry, doll. I didn't think he'd be quite that peculiar —"

"— But after *all!*"

"— Of course he's a foreigner. What was that word?"

He jotted it down.

While they were doing the dishes Betty said, "I think he was drunk. Falling-down drunk."

"No," Walter said. "It's exactly the same thing he did in my office. As though he expected a chair to come to him instead of him going to a chair." He laughed and said uncertainly, "Or maybe he's royalty. I read once about Queen Victoria never looking around before she sat down, she was so sure there'd be a chair there."

"Well, there isn't any more royalty, not to speak of," she said angrily, hanging up the dish towel. "What's on TV tonight?"

"Uncle Miltie. But . . . uh . . . I think I'll read. Uh . . . where do you keep those magazines of yours, doll? Believe I'll give them a try."

She gave him a look that he wouldn't meet, and she went to get him some of her magazines. She also got a slim green book which she hadn't looked at for years. While Walter flipped uneasily through the magazines she studied the book.

After about ten minutes she said: "Walter. *Seemonjoe*. I think I know what language it is."

He was instantly alert. "Yeah? What?"

"It should be spelled c-i-m-a-n-g-o, with little jiggers

over the C and G. It means 'universal food' in Esperanto."

"Where's Esperanto?" he demanded.

"Esperanto isn't anywhere. It's an artificial language. I played around with it a little once. It was supposed to end war and all sorts of things. Some people called it 'the language of the future'." Her voice was tremulous.

Walter said, "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

He saw Clurg go into the neighborhood movie for the matinee. That gave him about three hours.

Walter hurried to the Curran bungalow, remembered to slow down and tried hard to look casual as he unlocked the door and went in. There wouldn't be any trouble — he was a good citizen, known and respected — he could let himself into a tenant's house and wait for him to talk about business if he wanted to.

He tried not to think of what people would think if he should be caught rifling Clurg's luggage, as he intended to do. He had brought along an assortment of luggage keys. Surprised by his own ingenuity, he had got them at a locksmith's by saying his own key was lost and he didn't want to haul a heavy packed bag downtown.

But he didn't need the keys. In the bedroom closet the two suitcases stood, unlocked.

There was nothing in the first except uniformly new clothes, bought locally at good shops. The second was full of the same. Going through a rather extreme sports jacket, Walter found a wad of paper in the breast pocket. It was a newspaper page. A number had been penciled on a margin; apparently the sheet had been torn out and stuck into the pocket and forgotten. The dateline on the paper was July 18th, 2403.

Walter had some trouble reading the stories at first, but found it was easy enough if he read them aloud and listened to his voice.

One said:

TAIM KOP NABD:
PROSKYOOTR ASKS DETH

Patrolm'n Oskr Garth 'v thi Taim Polis w'z arest'd toodei at hiz hom, 4365 9863th Strit, and bookd at 9768th Prisint on tchardg'z 'v Polis-Ekspozh'r. Thi alledjd Ekspozh'r okur'd hwaile Garth w'z on dooti in thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri. It-konsist'd 'v hiz admish'n too a sit'zen 'v thi Twenti-Furst Sentch'ri that thi Taim Polis ekzisted and woz op'rated fr'm thi Twenti-Fifth Sentch'ri. The Proskyoot'rz Ofis sed thi deth pen'lti wil be askt in vyoo 'v thi heinus neitch'r 'v thi ofens, hwitch thret'nz thi hwol fabrik 'v Twenti-Fifth-Sentchri eksiz-tens.

There was an advertisement on the other side:

BOIZ 'ND YUNG MEN!
SERV EUR SENTCH'RI!
ENLIST IN THI TAIM POLIS
RISURV NOW!

RIMEMB'R —
ONLI IN THI TAIM POLIS
KAN EU SI THE
PAJENT 'V THI AJEZ!
ONLY IN THI TAIM POLIS
KAN EU PROTEKT EUR
SIVILIZASH'N FR'M
VARI'NS! THEIR IZ NO
HAIER SERVIS TOO AR
KULTCH'R! THEIR IZ NO
K'REER SO FAS'NATING
AZ A K'REER IN THI TAIM
POLIS!

Underneath it another ad asked:

HWAI BI ASHEIM'D 'V EUR
TCHAI'RZ? GET ROLFASTS!

No uth'r tcheir haz thi im-
midjit respons 'v a Rolfast. Sit
eihweir — eor Rolfast iz their!

Eur Rolfast met'l partz
ar solid gold too avoid
tairsum polishing. Eur
Rolfast beirings are thi
fain'st six-inch dupliks
di'mondz for long wair.

Walter's heart pounded. Gold
— to avoid tiresome polishing!
Six-inch diamonds — for long
wear!

And Clurg must be a time po-
liceman. "Only in the time police
can you see the pageant of the
ages!" What did a time policeman
do? He wasn't quite clear about
that. But what they *didn't* do was
let anybody else — anybody ear-
lier — know that the Time Police

existed. He, Walter Lachlan of the
Twentieth Century, held in the
palm of his hand Time Policeman
Clurg of the Twenty-Fifth Cen-
tury — the Twenty-Fifth Century
where gold and diamonds were
common as steel and glass in this!

He was there when Clurg came
back from the matinee.

Mutely, Walter extended the
page of newsprint. Clurg snatched
it incredulously, stared at it and
crumpled it in his fist. He col-
lapsed on the floor with a groan.
"I'm done for!" Walter heard him
say.

"Listen, Clurg," Walter said.
"Nobody ever needs to know
about this — *nobody*."

Clurg looked up with sudden
hope in his eyes. "You will keep
silent?" he asked wildly. "It is
my life!"

"What's it worth to you?"
Walter demanded with brutal di-
rectness. "I can use some of those
diamonds and some of that gold.
Can you get it into this century?"

"It would be missed. It would
be over my mass-balance," Clurg
said. "But I have a Duplix. I can
copy diamonds and gold for you;
that was how I made my feoff
money."

He snatched an instrument
from his pocket — a fountain pen,
Walter thought. "It is low in
charge. It would Duplix about five
kilograms in one operation —"

"You mean," Walter demanded,

"that if I brought you five kilograms of diamonds and gold you could duplicate it? And the originals wouldn't be harmed? Let me see that thing. Can I work it?"

Clurg passed over the "fountain pen". Walter saw that within the case was a tangle of wires, tiny tubes, lenses — he passed it back hastily. Clurg said, "That is correct. You could buy or borrow jewelry and I could dupliX it. Then you could return the originals and retain the copies. You swear by your contemporary God that you would say nothing?"

Walter was thinking. He could scrape together a good 30,000 dollars by pledging the house, the business, his own real estate, the bank account, the life insurance, the securities. Put it all into diamonds, of course, and then — *doubled! Overnight!*

"I'll say nothing," he told Clurg. "If you come through." He took the sheet from the 25th-century newspaper from Clurg's hands and put it securely in his own pocket. "When I get those diamonds duplicated," he said, "I'll burn this and forget the rest. Until then, I want you to stay close to home. I'll come around in a day or so with the stuff for you to duplicate."

Clurg nervously promised.

The secrecy, of course, didn't include Betty. He told her when he got home and she let out a yell

of delight. She demanded the newspaper, read it avidly, and then demanded to see Clurg.

"I don't think he'll talk," Walter said doubtfully. "But if you really want to . . ."

She did, and they walked to the Curran bungalow. Clurg was gone, lock, stock and barrel, leaving not a trace behind. They waited for hours, nervously.

At last Betty said, "He's gone back."

Walter nodded. "He wouldn't keep his bargain, but by God I'm going to keep mine. Come along. We're going to the *Enterprise*."

"Walter," she said. "You wouldn't — would you?"

He went alone, after a bitter quarrel.

At the *Enterprise* office he was wearily listened to by a reporter, who wearily looked over the 25th-century newspaper. "I don't know what you're peddling, Mr. Lachlan," he said, "but we like people to buy their ads in the *Enterprise*. This is a pretty bare-faced publicity grab."

"But —" Walter sputtered.

"Sam, would you please ask Mr. Morris to come up here if he can?" the reporter was saying into the phone. To Walter he explained, "Mr. Morris is our press-room foreman."

The foreman was a huge, white-haired old fellow, partly deaf. The reporter showed him the newspaper from the twenty-fifth cen-

Continued on page 103



illustrator:
L. R. Summers



By Kris Neville

For an effective tale of pure horror, you need far more than writhing spectres in the cold moonlight and eerie screams from the local cemetery. Instead, take a couple of nice normal people, put them at the mercy of some evil force straight from the flaming halls of Hell, stick in an effective mood to carry the load — and you've got the ingredients for a top-grade chiller.

In The Opal Necklace, Kris Neville has done exactly that, and the result is a weird wedding of the practical and the outre, in prose that comes close to being sheer poetry — but poetry with muscle!

"Yes, Mother."

"Come here, my child."

"Yes, Mother."

"Here. Out the window — the swamp. You see the swamp?"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch flung open the casement. "Listen!"

Night was coming down. Long shadows fingered their way over the bayous. Water, heavy with vegetation, lapped faintly against the stunted mangroves. Bull frogs opened their bass symphony, echoing and re-echoing from farther

and farther away as others from the far side chimed in. Tiny tree frogs chirped; crickets grated their eerie notes. A loon, laughing mournfully, flapped across the tree tops.

"And you want to leave it? Answer me!"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch cackled, and her thin, cracked voice drifted out over the swamp. "You can't leave it," she said. "You *can't* leave it. Its water is your blood, and its air is your lungs." She closed the window against the mosquitoes. The air was hot and humid and sour. "It's *you!* You can't leave it, do you hear? Do you hear?"

"Yes, Mother."

The witch sniffed. "You're swamp. If you leave it, you'll leave something of yourself here. You'll have nothing left to hold you together: the wind and the world will tear you to pieces. Love? Love can't hold *you* together, my child; not for long, my child. Only the swamp and the shadows and the darkness can." She flitted across the room to the old, rough-hewn table. She picked up a string of jewels. "Opals. People don't string opals," she cackled, pointing a bony finger at the girl. "They're bad luck. You know that?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You think you want power over him," the witch said. "Don't you?"

"Yes, Mother."

"But you don't *know* what you want, do you? Oh, you may *think* you know. Yes. But you don't. No — you don't. But you'll find it!"

The girl's teeth were chattering.

Chuckling, the old witch bent and lit a yellow tallow candle with a kitchen match. The flame spiraled straight up, giving off a faint, gray smoke and a sharp, greasy odor. She cocked her head, listening. "Hear them boys singing?" she rasped. "Hear them? That's you, too. Hear them?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Yes Mother, yes Mother, yes Mother," the witch mimicked. "Is that all you can say: yes Mother? Are you afraid of me? Is that it?"

"Yes, Mother."

The witch threw back her head and laughed shrilly; her talon-like fingers pawed the air with mirth. Then, as the laughter sobbed away, she began to chant, "Shelia Larson's afraid! Shelia Larson's afraid! Shelia Larson's afraid!"

She spun to face the girl; her face writhed in delight. Her eyes sparkled. Her wrinkled, grimy cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Did they teach you to be afraid of witches out there?" She waved her hands in a circle to indicate the world beyond the swamp. "No, no, no. No, they taught you to laugh at me out there, didn't they? But when you came back,

and when you wanted something, it was: yes Mother this, and yes Mother that, and you'll be glad enough when I do it. You're swamp, you hear!"

The witch was suddenly in front of her; one of her filthy hands circled Shelia's arm. "Stop shaking, stop shaking, stop shaking," she chuckled, peering up into the girl's face. "Did you bring the money, eh?"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch let her hand fall away. "Put it on the table. Put it on the table."

Shelia crossed the room and placed the stack of silver coins next to the string of opals. The coins clinked together as she took her hand away. They gleamed dully in the candle light.

The old witch went to the table, and Shelia backed away. The witch picked up the opals, let them flow from one hand to the other. She crooned to them.

"Did you bring his hair, his nail parings?"

"Some dried blood, Mother."

The old witch cackled. "Good, good, good. Give it me!" She extended the bony hand, took the paper, peered at the brownish drops on it.

From the table the old witch selected a long, slender knife. Carefully she scraped the dried blood into a cracked pewter jar. She dipped into another jar,

added something to the blood. Then her hands began to fly, adding, testing, mixing. Finally she stirred.

When the mixture was to her satisfaction, she sprinkled white powder over the opals. "All his joys," she chanted. "All her husband's joys. One, two, three, four. Into the opals, go into the opals. Five, six, seven, eight. . . ." One by one she polished them between her fingers. Then she dropped the string into the pewter jar. The opals made little bubbles in the syrupy, brownish liquid. Her cracked voice rose and fell in a Cajun chant. It whined and whispered and shrieked. She drew out the opals, dried each one carefully. The thin, tough silk cord on which they were strung was blood red. She handed the opals across the table.

"Go, go, go," she chanted softly.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," the carnie called, his voice flat and monotonous. "Yes sir, step right this way! I'm giving away money at this booth! I'm kee-razy! Yes, over here's the crazy man! . . . What's that, sonny, whatcha say, sonny? You don't believe I'm crazy? Then step right up and I'll show you a picture of my wife. . . . Yes sir, yes sir. Over here's the crazy man, giving away money! Yes, he's giving it away!"

The ground was black, packed

hard by a thousand trampling feet, cluttered over with cigarette butts, gum wrappers, candy sticks, torn paper. There were swirling lights and happy holiday bunting and pink cotton candy. A calliope piped out its shrill notes to blend with the pleased child screams. A rifle cracked over and over in the shooting gallery.

Shelia Larson and her husband Gib, hand in hand, forced their way through the swirling crowd.

"Hootchy-kootchy girls, right this way. See the show that made Paireee. . . ."

"You want to try the roller-coaster again, honey?" Gib said.

Laughing, Shelia pushed the hair out of her face. "Not now," she gasped.

"Let's toss pennies then. Come on." Gib elbowed his way up to the booth. He turned to his wife. "Happy?"

"Yes," she said, her face shining, her eyes sparkling.

"Give me some change," he told the pitch man. The man counted out the pennies, and Gib gave half of them to Shelia. They laughed and tossed the coins at the colored squares. They won nothing, and when the pennies were gone they moved on, she clinging to his elbow possessively.

"Oh, look! They have a snake house!" Shelia cried, tugging at his coat. "Let's go!"

Gib smiled down at her. "Look at snakes after only five days of

being married to me?"

"I want to," she pouted.

He shrugged. "Well . . ."

The weird whine of a snake charmer's pipe called from the snake house. It was from a record, and there was a monotonous tick-tick-tick in it.

Gib bought two red pasteboard tickets and they entered through the tent flap.

There was sawdust on the floor inside. In the center of the tent there was a shallow pit surrounded by a two-foot canvas over which spectators might peer down at the writhing reptiles. Only one man was watching, but he was watching in motionless fascination.

The man in the pit was handling a four-foot black snake. He paid no attention to the spectators. He let the snake coil around his arm and bring its head level with his face. The snake weaved back and forth, its tongue flickering furiously. It ducked its head and snapped it forward a few inches, almost as if it were trying to kiss the man on the lips. The pit man pushed its head away gently.

Shelia leaned forward, her eyes bright, her breath coming sharply.

"Let me see it!" she said to the pit man, holding out her hand.

The pit man turned to stare at her. "These are dangerous, lady."

She narrowed her eyes and glanced around the pit contemptuously. "Snakes like these?" she



asked, her voice low and throaty.

"Don't bother the man, Shelia," Gib suggested.

She turned her jet black eyes to her husband's face. "I want that snake."

Gib smiled indulgently. "I think we'd better go."

She ignored him and turned back to the pit man. Again she held out her hand. Their eyes locked. For a moment, they both stood motionless. Then he wavered.

"Okay, lady," he said, crossing the pit to her. "It's your funeral."

She reached out caressingly for the black snake, and it slithered onto her arm. She petted its scaly, sinuous body, and its tongue darted over her hand. She brought its head up, petting it softly just back of the jaws and laughing into its moving tongue.

"Let's go, Shelia," Gib said nervously. "Let's get out of here."

She pointed the snake at him playfully.

"Don't," he muttered.

"What's the matter? You afraid?" she chided gently.

"Of course not. Don't be silly. I just don't like the things. Give it back and let's go."

"All right," she said. "If you insist."

Once more on the midway, Gib said, "Why in the world did you want to handle that damned snake for?"

She looked up into his face. It was harsh and angular and cold in the vicious electric lights. Her heart was still pounding with the excitement of the swamp symbol, the snake. "You wouldn't understand," she said.

Uncomfortable silence fell between them; neither smiled. He guided her to a booth and bought two candied apples without asking if she wanted one.

Leaning against the booth, his candied apple in his left hand, he said, "Shelia, that snake —"

Her eyes darkened. "Look, Gib. Let's not argue."

He flushed under the tan. For a moment he seemed about to snap something, but instead he said, in

a quiet voice, "Of course not, Shelia."

The hot, southern night was clammy, and the air was stale with sweat and carnival smells.

She reached up and fingered the opals around her neck. If I should ever lose him, she thought, I should hate as a wild thing hates; as the dark savage I am, deep inside of me. Her fingers moved on the opals. It was the same petting gesture she had given the snake. I have these, she thought, if I should ever lose him. All his joys — everything he has — are in these opals. If they are destroyed, he has nothing.

"Honey," he said, "Why don't you let me buy you a string of pearls or something? Whoever heard of opals on a string, and a God-awful red string at that?"

Her hand dropped away from her throat.

"In New York —" he began.

"I'll wear them there, too," she said desperately. "Oh, Gib, Gib, Gib, let's not quarrel!"

"Gib, you shouldn't have brought me up here," Shelia said suddenly.

He pushed back his breakfast coffee, a hurt, puzzled look in his eyes.

Nervously, she stood up and crossed to the window. She stared out, over roof tops, along Park Avenue from the Eighty-fourth Street apartment. The buildings

were bleak and dirty and squalid, and the large flakes of falling snow were soot-blackened as they fell.

"I hate this snow," she said. "I hate the sight of it and the smell of it. I hate this city." She turned from the window.

He was standing by the table now and his hands hung loosely at his sides. "I won't go down today if you don't want me to."

"No," she said. "Go on."

"Look. How's this? I'll get a couple of tickets to *South Pacific*, and —"

"No!" she snapped. "For God's sake, is that all you think about? Theater! Cocktail parties! And that damned Italian restaurant on Fifty-second street you're so fond of!"

The breakfast nook was neat and clean around them. The silver glistened beside alabaster plates. The thin glassware looked pathetically fragile without linen beneath it. The electric toaster popped and purred.

"What's the matter, honey?" he said after a moment.

"You better go," she said. "Please. Get out."

"Are you . . . sick?"

"No. Please leave, Gib. Quickly."

After he was gone she stood staring out the window into the vacant cold. The snow was deadening; it covered the warm streets like a giant vampire, sucking out all the aliveness. The sky choked down, trapping the world in slow

suffocation. It hungered after her body. She ached for the warm, moist world of the swamp.

She whirled savagely from the window. She picked up the orange juice glass and dashed it to the floor. It shivered brightly in all directions.

She went to the bedroom. It still had a warm, masculine odor. She opened the dresser and removed the choke string of opals. They were beautifully matched, tapering in pairs to the single, great, glowing one in the center. She held them in her hands, telling them slowly, as if she were holding a rosary. The opals were milky; they sparkled with rainbow dashes of fire. She held them up to the light, fascinated.

She heard the maid come in, and she dropped the opals guiltily, and they lay in the drawer, no longer a symbol of love, no longer warm with love; cold with snow, north wind, and strange, city faces. She stared hard at their icy glitter.

She crossed to the mirror and studied her face: her jet black hair, her creamy skin, her almost too large, sensuous mouth, her midnight eyes. Hard, vicious lines tightened in the corners of her mouth, and her hands curled tightly. . . .

When he came home from nine hours in the business world, Gib said, kissing her on the passively-

offered cheek, "Shall we stay home tonight like old married folks?"

"I want to go out," she said.

"Oh?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "I thought you said this morning . . . Well, all right, dear. If you want to. Shall I phone Elmer and Mary, and we'll make it a foursome? How does the Waldorf sound?"

"No," she said, her eyes strange swamp pools. "I hate Mary!"

He took off his heavy top coat. He hung the coat carefully on the hall tree. "What's come over you, darling?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Nothing at all."

"The way you snap at me, it seems like whatever I say is going to be wrong."

Her lips curled too much at the corners.

"Look, Shelia. Now, see here!" But he couldn't think of anything to continue with, so he turned uncertainly to adjust his top coat; he brushed at the sleeves and plucked at the collar. After a moment he said, "Where would you like to go tonight?"

"Out," she said. "Somewhere wild. Harlem. Somewhere where people drink and fight and sing and love and hate. Somewhere *real!*"

He fumbled for a cigarette. "Look, Shelia. Why don't you take a month and run down to your home? I'll make the arrange-

ments for you at —"

"No," she said very slowly. "No, I think I want to stay near you." Her voice was husky. "I think I want to stay right here."

She picked up a man, without ever really looking at his face, in a little bar out somewhere near One-twenty-fifth Street. She took him back in a taxi, and he followed her up after loitering outside the apartment house for a few minutes, smoking restlessly. He pretended to be very skillful in such affairs, and he smelled of some astringent lotion and some cloying hair tonic and shoe polish. When it was over, she had difficulty getting him out of the apartment; and difficulty convincing him not to come back and not to phone.

He was gone, and she sat alone on the disarrayed bed, giggling. She drank again from the nearly empty fifth of gin that she had brought back with her. Benny, their cocker, lying before the bed, beat a ceaseless tattoo on the deep rug with his nervous tail. She laughed a bit hysterically at the sound, and with drink-heavy hands she tried to smooth the bed. The shadows, slipping in with coming night, were alive and pulsing and sad.

She drank again, and the bottle was empty, and she threw it to the silencing carpet where it lay on its flat, etched side, next to the dog.

Her hair was twisted and awry. The choker string of opals was tight on her neck: she had worn them since morning. Her wrinkled, pink slip spilled from the broken strap of her left shoulder.

The shadows muttered.

She heard him at the door. She heard the elevator click shut and fall away, sighing.

She ran from the bedroom, and Benny padded silently after her. She ran to her husband, barefoot, and simpering with eagerness.

Gig saw at a glance and, disgusted, brushed past her.

She followed him from the outer door down the short hallway, but at the doorway opening on the two steps down into the living room, she stopped. "Why'n'cha say somethin'?" she lisped.

Staring not at her, but at the trunk from Ceylon that rested on a squat stand against the far wall beside the flexible lamp, he said, "You're drunk, Shelia."

"Why'n'cha tell me I'm no good?" she demanded, screwing her face savagely in fury.

Still without looking at her, pity in his eyes now, he said, "You better go take a cold shower, Shelia."

"Why'n'cha tell me I'm no good?" she insisted. "Why'n'cha say you wish I was dead?"

Muscles jumped in his lean jaw. "Anyone can get drunk one time."

"There was a . . . man here. . . ." she said.

His face changed and, for the first time since his initial inspection, he turned to look at her. His eyes were suddenly understanding. "Is it about your parents?" he asked quietly. "Did something happen to your parents? What is it?"

She hiccupped. "Nothin' happen' to my parents. There was a man here's all."

"You're drunk, Shelia."

"I slep' with him!" she cried in drunken glee. "There was a man here, an' I slep' with him!"

There was a shocked instant of silence, during which even the shadows were still.

"You brought me up here," she shrieked, "and you made me come up here, and now you've trapped me here, an' I'm caught in th' walls an' a li'le bit of me is in the skies an' I've got to get all of me back! You made me do it. You made me sleep with him, an' I won' forget. . . . Why'n'cha tell me I'm no good!"

His head bowed. He turned toward the bedroom. His lips were a thin line.

"Ain't'cha gonna call me a bitch!" she screamed. "Why'n'cha tell me I'm a nogood bitch?"

He left the room.

"I guess I showed you you couldn't treat me like — like — like . . . I guess I showed you!" she screamed after him.

He was packing. After a while she heard a suitcase lid slam and the lock catch. He came out of the bedroom and she stood waiting, and he brushed her aside angrily, calling, "Here, Benny! Here, Benny! Here, Benny!"

She weaved after him. "You think it's my fault, a'm'fault, don' ya?"

He knelt to take the dog.

"Don' ya, don' ya!"

"No," he said. "I blame myself, too." He held out his hand. "Here, Benny, come on, old boy."

"You should!" she crowed. "You should. It is your fault, all your ownswee'li'le fault, an' I'm gonna remember it!"

Gib put the squirming dog under his right arm and seized the suitcase viciously in his left hand. He stood up. "I'll send for the rest of my stuff."

"I'm gonna go home," she said drunkenly. "I'm all apart, an' I can't leave anything." She began to sob. "When I get myself back, I'm gonna go home!"

He stared at her.

"Get *out*!" she cried hysterically.

After the door closed behind him and the dog, she stood dazed and unmoving. Finally, in a dream-like stupor, she reached up and freed her neck of the opals, breaking the string, spilling the gems loose into her hand. She selected a small one, placed the rest in a careful pile on the mantel-

piece. She looked at the small opal, and her eyes were feverish. Hypnotized by it, she walked leadenly to the kitchen. She put the opal on the floor. She took the electric iron, seldom used, from its dusty shelf. She pounded the opal with the base of the iron, and when it splintered into tiny fragments, she pounded them, and then she began to cry.

Downstairs, Benny squirmed out of Gib's arms and dashed in front of a hurrying Checkered Cab. There was a squeal of brakes, an excited snarl, a simultaneous thump and yip, and Benny lay dead and mangled in the slush.

"Hello," Elmer said nervously, avoiding Shelia's eyes. He hesitated a moment, his upper lip twitching angrily. "May I come in?"

She stepped back from the door.

She did not offer to take his coat, and he stood awkwardly beside her in the narrow hall. She did not look at him. She studied the Japanese print of a dove on a twisted branch that was hanging beside the hall mirror. The week-old flowers on the table were withered and dead.

"We better go in and sit down," he said.

Silently, she led the way.

When they were seated, he hunted beneath his top coat for his cigarette case, and without asking permission, he lit a cig-

arette. "I've just come from Gib," he said. "He was getting drunk again. He's never tried to drink much; I guess you know that. He gets drunk and keeps on drinking. See here, now, Shelia, he's had a very bad week."

Shelia crossed to the mantelpiece, rising from her chair as if in a dream. The opals were there in a box of white cotton, and four of them were missing. She fingered the box. "He phoned me to say Benny was dead," she said. "I told him not to phone me anymore. But I think he was trying to call today. I didn't answer the phone."

Elmer jerked the cigarette nervously. "He's actually physically sick, Shelia. He'll ruin his health. I think you should see him."

"No."

"He lost the wedding band you gave him. He's almost hysterical about it. He wants to know if he lost it while he was packing here?"

She fingered a spot where an opal had lain. "No," she said. "He didn't lose it here."

Elmer put the cigarette in the ash tray; his face was frozen in harsh lines. "He got a telegram this morning. His mother is very ill. He was too drunk when it came to make much sense out of it. And now he's getting drunk all over again. If you'd see him, maybe you could straighten him out enough to go up to see her."

She smiled faintly, rubbing the

spot where the opal she had shattered last night had lain. "I can't go back to him," she said. The remaining deadly opals were dark fire.

"Look here, damn it!" Elmer snapped, his face reddening with anger. "By God, after what he's done for you, I think you could show a little concern! He brought you up here and gave you a beautiful home and beautiful clothes and did everything he could in God's green earth to make you happy! I don't know what kind of a person you are, but I can't imagine anyone asking for better treatment than you got! I think at least for that, if not for anything else, you could see him! I think you owe him that much! You owe him at least that!"

She stared at the box in silence.

"My *God*, woman, what are you after!"

She whirled on him. "Myself!" she cried. "I'm after myself! He took *me*! Don't you see, I've got to get myself back! There's some of me in this hideous cold room, and there's some of me in his mother. There was some of me in Benny and the ring. I've got to get it all back so I can be whole again! He brought me up here and little by little I lost pieces of myself because he couldn't hold me together, and little by little I've got to get them back, and then I can go away. He brought me here to this hungry city, and I want to

hurt him like he hurt me, but most of all I've got to be whole again!" She was sobbing. "I hate him! I hate him!"

"What are you trying to *do* to him!"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"You crazy, sadistic *bitch*!"

"I hate him," she cried.

Then the door slammed, and Elmer was gone. Shelia went to a chair and sat unmoving, her lips parted, her breathing shallow. Seconds fell like the dust of Caesar. And then she stirred. Her hand, like a dying bird, fluttered weakly.

The day after Elmer called, she went out and slipped her address — in a note that she put beneath the saucer along with a twenty-dollar bill — to a soda jerk. He came as soon as he could, as she had known he would.

She made him sit down. He twisted nervously in the chair, staring around at the expensive apartment. He smiled nervously.

"It's all in these opals," she said. "They were put in the opals."

In the corner, although the soda jerk would not see her, the witch chuckled dryly, like dead, burning leaves.

"That's all my husband's joys, don't you see?" she said intently. "I have to punish him for what he did to me. But that's not all. No. I'm not *whole* any more, not until

I get all of myself back! Until I get all our night whispers and love words and caresses and laughter and hot sweat and moans and tears and everything!"

The soda jerk squirmed, twisting his head on his skinny neck.

She leaned toward him, smelling of perfume. "I wish you were a garbage collector," she said thickly. "I wanna find a garbage collector, so me and him can go to the Stork Club."

The soda jerk massaged his bony Adam's apple, and Shelia frowned drunkenly. "That'll show him," she said. "I want to *hurt* him." She held out her arms. "Come here. I want you to . . . Come here!"

"Gosh, Miss . . . I . . . I don't understand you at all, not at all."

She bit her lip. She hesitated. Then she crossed nervously to the phonograph, put on a stack of records.

"Let's dance," she said, breathing heavily. "You can understand me. I'm easy to understand."

The soda jerk refused to look into her eyes.

The witch fell silent in the corner when the music came, but the shadows beyond the lamp waited restlessly, and the opal fire on the mantelpiece pulsed uneasily.

The soda jerk was gone. He had fled, and she sat by herself on the sofa for some time. The telephone

began ringing. She walked the apartment without answering it.

She took another drink, and the old witch said, "Shelia Larson's afraid!"

The opals pulsed hate. Her breathing was shallow. She picked up an opal, replaced it. It lay glittering. Repelling and attracting, and all the room focused waiting on the opal, and the witch said, "Shelia Larson's afraid!" And the opal fire twisted sinuously.

She went to the bath and turned on the shower, and flowing through routine movements undressed and got beneath it.

The water was spring rain upon white lilies, and her body trembled, and dripping down the drain the water said, "One, two, three, four . . ."

She stood, drying, before the mirror. She studied her sweaty face. Quickly she turned away and slipped into the robe. She knotted the belt with trembling fingers.

Back in the living room, the phonograph was still playing. She poured herself a drink when she came out of the bathroom.

"Go on," the old witch said.

Outside the window the night trembled, waiting.

The shadows came out to dance and chant, and Shelia went to the opals and took one down, and the old witch cackled and lit the tallow candle with a kitchen

match, and the smoke had a greasy smell.

And the sour swamp air came in, and the distant call of a loon, and the hungry lap of water, and the slither of movement.

Outside the moon topped the buildings and shone down, a cold, barren, passionless, knowledgeable jewel of infinity.

Shelia drank again, and then

she stumbled over a shadow.

The shadow led her, and she was in the kitchen with the electric iron in her hand, and reverently she lay the largest opal of all on the linoleum and raised the electric iron, and the witch rent the air with hysterical laughter, and the electric iron came savagely down.

And Gib wept at her funeral.

Continued from page 89

tury and said, "How about this?"

Mr. Morris looked at it and smelled it and said, showing no interest in the reading matter: "American Type Foundry Futura number nine, discontinued about ten years ago. It's been hand-set. The ink — hard to say. Expensive stuff, not a news ink. A book ink, a job-printing ink. The paper, now, I know. A nice linen rag that Benziger jobs in Philadelphia."

"You see, Mr. Lachlin? It's a fake." The reporter shrugged.

Walter walked slowly from the city room. The press-room foreman *knew*. It was a fake. And Clurg was a faker. Suddenly Walter's heels touched the ground after twenty-four hours and stayed there. Good God, the diamonds! Clurg was a conman! He would have worked a package switch! He would have had thirty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds

for less than a month's work!

He told Betty about it when he got home and she laughed unmercifully. "Time Policeman" was to become a family joke between the Lachlans.

Harry Twenty-Third Street stood, blinking, in a very peculiar place. Peculiarly, his feet were firmly encased, up to the ankles, in a block of clear plastic.

There were odd-looking people and a big voice was saying: "May it please the court. The People of the Twenty-Fifth Century versus Harold Parish, alias Harry Twenty-Third Street, alias Clurg, of the Twentieth Century. The charge is impersonating an officer of the Time Police. The Prosecutor's Office will ask the death penalty in view of the heinous nature of the offense, which threatens the whole fabric —"



BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

If you like belly-laughs based on biology, stranglings strewn with sex, tenterhooks that are titillating, then we heartily recommend this story of a French town beset by a killer from beyond the stars — a killer that seeks as victims those whose blood runs hot. Death follows death as the townspeople bar their doors; yet all the time the answer lies in the twisted mind of Hyacinth Peuch, the village idiot.

. . . Here is a story Honoré de Balzac might well have written. While Eric Frank Russell probably aspires to no such place in literature, a tale like this might well put him there!

IN one of the dales of Brittany close upon the woody border of the Department de Morbihan nestles a tiny village called Chateau-verne. Is that name familiar to you?

If it isn't, that is because M. le Préfect de Morbihan and his superiors in Paris did all they

could to keep its stranglings out of the newspapers. There is no point in spreading terror beyond terror. Besides, the tourist trade had to be considered.

The Abbé Courtot cooperated by sealing the lips of the faithful so far as they could be sealed, which was for about five yards

Illustrator: L. R. Summers

OF HYACINTH PEUCH



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from his person, he being somewhat deaf.

To look at Chateauverne today you would find it difficult to believe that not so long ago its inhabitants feared to walk in darkness. Some of the signs are still there: a certain tenseness among the younger folk, a reluctance to take their love-making into the shadowed nooks of seldom-used paths.

If observant, you will note that even the oldest, most neglected and tumbledown houses have heavy shutters of solid oak fitted with enormous bolts and hand-forged bars that kept Emile Périè busy at his anvil for more than a month.

Here and there may be seen a few tired-eyed folk in somber clothes. The attendance at the Église St. Marie is twenty per cent greater than of yore, more regular, more reverent. Of course, there still remains a hard core of incorrigibles who sit the other side of the square, drinking and spitting, watching the parade of the pious with the air of men convinced that only dirty people need to wash. Nevertheless, the Devil added to the Abbé's flock by taking away from it.

Chateauverne is a cluster of terra-cotta-roofed houses hugging a cobbled square where Hyacinth Peuch, the local imbecile, slumbers among the hogs and chickens. At one side rises the solemn-belled

tower of the Église. Next to it sits the hoary home of the Abbé and the general store of the Widow Martin. At the opposite side, shading the seated cynics, is the long, low auberge of Jean-Pierre Boitavin, whose brother Baptiste was the fourth to be slaughtered before the rain came.

The population numbers six hundred, has not waxed or waned in the last couple of centuries. Chateauverne's citizens are almost entirely devoted to agriculture — if constant itching and bitching can be called devotion — and therefore have the earthy sophistication of those in daily contact with lower and gustier forms of life. They procreated judiciously, with one eye upon later years and the other on the bank balance. In the Abbé's opinion they knew more than was good for their immortal souls.

Death clattered bonily onto this stage one warm evening in May when the air was rich and slumber-some and night beetles droned under the trees.

Josephine Rimbaud had a date. She was young, buxom, interestingly rounded and far from overburdened with intellectual capacity. This tender and inviting handicap lent a splendid impartiality to her emotions, so much so, indeed, that she had been known to respond with a tempting smile to the vacuous grin of Hyacinth

Peuch who — though not so far sunk in idiocy as to overlook a well-turned leg — was generally regarded as a most deplorable accomplice in any amatory adventure.

That Josephine should be a trifle lacking in one respect while obviously possessing more than a sufficiency in others was a matter requiring correction at somebody's hands. It is natural to urge others toward perfection. Of the many tutors who were eager to assist with her education she chose Hercule Girandole, a farmer's son, because he had wavy hair and Hercule sounds massive and mighty and a *girandole* is a revolving fire-work. She was by no means averse to dallying with a revolving fire-work.

So at eight o'clock when shadows were deepening Josephine set forth, intent upon improving her mind by taking simple lessons in biology from the worthy and accomplished Hercule. She had attired herself in ribbons and flounces that suitably enhanced her feminine attractions, was sweetly scented in the likeliest places and athirst for education.

Trotting gaily in the full length of the Avenue des Hirondelles, once part of the Verne estate, she took a narrow, thicket-flanked path toward the old plantation where a dozen generations before her had shyly retired for the same delightful purpose.

The trysting place was by a small granite obelisk inscribed: *Ici La Météorite de 1897*. This was not literally correct, for the stone from space had been exhumed years ago and sent some place where it could be snooped over by profound old men long in the hair and short in the sight. Even the hole it had caused was now filled and overgrown. Trees crowded all around, shutting out the rays of the inquisitive moon and assuring a pleasing privacy for the vibrant couples beneath.

Stopping by the obelisk, Josephine peered around as best she could in the semi-dark. A warm, gentle wind sighed through the trees. The turf was softer than a bed. Josephine was ready.

"Hercule!" She whispered it tremulously. She could do little else. Such an underbreath call is seductive, enticing, whereas the commanding bellow she yearned to utter would have been unmaidenly. She tidied her bosom, wondering whether he was hiding from her, tantalizing her, waiting for her to ripen to desperation. "Hercule!"

No response. Only the rustling of the trees and the wind sighing high. She frowned. Possibly he was late. If so, it was unseemly of him. The female may be tardy to emphasize her modesty, her shy reluctance to enter the trap so long as no other female beats her to it.

But the male should be on time. Better still, ahead of time, early. Stamping, fidgeting, alternating between hope and despair, racked by passion, consumed with desire.

This was too bad. Her indignation rising along with her inward hunger, she walked around the obelisk, sought behind a bush, went to investigate the other side of a nearby tree and tumbled headlong over a pair of tangled legs.

Scrambling upright with no other thought than that this evening had a potent curse upon it, she stooped and peered at the legs, followed the dim shape along to its distorted face, discovered that the revolving firework would fizz no more.

Josephine turned and ran. No screams. No gasps. No wild and terrible calls for help. Only her mouth open, her ample hips swinging as she ran in utter silence, without stop or pause, the full two kilometers to the village. The first person she saw was the Widow Martin looming massively in the doorway of her store. Racing up to her she gasped a few frantic words, dropped to the cobblestones and gave herself over to a fit of hysterics.

Now, the Widow Martin weighed one hundred kilos, had a black mustache and once had killed a hog with a backhand blow in-

tended to discourage it from her vegetable patch. Germaine Joubert, the village gossip, often swore that the unfortunate animal had performed three somersaults before it closed its eyes and expired with an expression exactly like that of the late Henri Martin in his last moments, a similarity that might well be no coincidence. You will gather from this that the Widow Martin was *très formidable* and the last person to be moved by Josephine's anguish.

Staring down over her lip-fungus, she snapped, "No matter what that wastrel Girandole has done, rolling in horse-dung will not cure it."

Hippolyte Lemaître left his seat outside the auberge and mooched across the square, followed by Hyacinth Peuch and several others. All gaped at Josephine, especially at the little extra she did not display in more sanguine moments.

Hippolyte spoke to the Widow Martin: "What is wrong, Hortense?"

"That Girandole, he has been clumsy."

"Tut!" said Hippolyte, to whom lack of dexterity in mating was the unforgivable sin.

"Hercule!" Josephine sat up, her eyes wet, red, and full of horror. "He is dead!"

"What?" exclaimed Hippolyte.

"Dead?" said the Widow Martin.

"All twisted up and wrung dry. I saw him." She flopped back, started another fit. "Terrible! Terrible!"

"It will rain soon," giggled Hyacinth Peuch, exposing teeth like aged and falling tombstones. "Plenty of rain — you'll see!"

"Where is this?" demanded Hippolyte Lemaître, frowning down. "Where? Speak, child!"

"By the meteor stone."

"Probably she dropped it on him," was the Widow Martin's muscular suggestion.

"I didn't!" screamed Josephine.

Germaine Joubert arrived, her thin nose twitching, her watery eyes darting this way and that. "You didn't what?"

"She didn't give in to Girandole," informed the Widow Martin, who always thought of Germaine as something staring beady-eyed around the bend of a sewer. "She cut out his guts. It was death before dishonor."

"I didn't!" Josephine shrieked.

"My!" said Germaine, her false hair trying to stand up with the real. "My!" She hurried away to be the first to distribute the news.

"Well," said Hippolyte, doubtfully, "I will go and telephone Sif. Somebody had better look

into this right away."

The Widow Martin nodded, watched him walk away. Ignoring Josephine, she sat on her doorstep, stroked idly at her upper lip.

"It will rain soon," repeated Hyacinth Peuch. He snickered, studying her with his head held lopsided. "Much rain. You'll see!"

Half an hour later it poured in torrents.

Napoleon Sif, the gendarme from Pontaupis, arrived upon his bicycle within the hour. His cape streamed with water, his socks were damp. He had the bilious wariness of one who is a natural as the victim of some dark conspiracy. Like most folk of Pontaupis, nine kilometers away, he

viewed Chateauverne as a sink of iniquity where anything might happen and usually did.

Stamping into the auberge, he shook his cape all over the floor, banged his peaked cap on the back of a chair, mopped his face with a handkerchief.

"What is this I hear? About a dead one?"

A chorus of voices answered him:

"Young Girandole."

"Curled round and round like a



tire-bouchon, under a tree, in the rain."

"Cold and bloodless by the obelisk."

"Old Rimbaud took Josephine home saying that he will beat the truth out of her."

"Hortense Martin thinks that —"

"Who cares what Hortense thinks?"

"Will you have a cognac?" asked Jean-Pierre Boitavin. "You are wet enough to have bicycled along the bed of the canal."

"But certainly." Sif became mollified. He eyed the glass, gently swirled its contents around, sniffed the bouquet, drank a little and smacked his lips. "Hah! Let Girandole wait. He can be no damper even if floating."

"Yes, let him wait," approved Jean-Pierre. "Even as I must wait unto the crack of doom. He owed me forty francs. A man has no right to die while owing forty francs. It is indecent."

Finishing his drink, Sif nodded agreement, having no difficulty in seeing the ethics of this. "If everyone did it we should all be ruined." Buttoning his cape, he posed with saturated authority. "One or two of you had better come with me to show where this debtor has expired."

A couple volunteered, more from morbid curiosity than any sense of public duty. Going out, they encountered the Abbé Courtot hurrying through the rain. The old

priest stopped at the sight of officialdom.

"What brings you here, my son? Nothing serious I hope?"

"Girandole is stiff in the woods."

"Indeed?" The Abbé shook a sorrowful head. "Hercule will not like that."

"No?" Sif stared at him.

"A drunken father is a source of shame."

"*Young Girandole*," yelled Sif right in his ear. "He is *dead*!"

"Dear me!" The Abbé took a startled step backward and massaged his hearing organ. "How dreadful! Such a nice young fellow. So well behaved."

Greatly troubled, he peered short-sightedly after them as they disappeared into the dark rain.

Most of the population of Chateauverne viewed the corpse, felt sick in their stomachs and had bad dreams. Excepting Emile Périè and the Widow Martin, both exceptionally hard characters. The brothers Boitavin made a special trip to l'Orient for a truck-load of extra cognac.

Two aged, uncertain doctors and Napoleon Sif agreed between them that no body could be so fearfully warped by any human agency and that therefore it would be best to place the blame in the broad, accommodating lap of the Almighty. They gave it forth that Hercule had been cut off in the flower of his youth by a bolt of

lightning. It was, they asserted, an act of God, moving in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.

To Girandole the Elder — whose wild oats once had been sown so fast that he had seldom been seen perpendicular, and who now spent his declining years dreaming with relish of bygone helling — it was pointed out that the sins of the fathers shall be paid for by posterity. Which system of justice, in his view, had much to be said for it.

Josephine, already recovered from her shock and looking around for new and vigorous conquerors, was sermonized to the effect that perhaps one minute of modesty had saved her from sharing the fate of her lover.

At the funeral the Abbé Courtot made full and legitimate use of the mournful circumstances, lecturing all and sundry upon various aspects of celestial vengeance, its sureness, its inevitability, and making oblique reference to the less than holy habits of certain parties whom everybody promptly identified as everybody else.

Hercule went down the hole. Napoleon cycled back to Pontaupis. Josephine Rimbaud permitted young Armand Descoules to accompany her in approximately a homeward direction, hoping that somewhere en route he might see fit to offer more than spiritual consolation. Hyacinth Peuch stayed to help fill the grave, serab-

bling the soil with his bare hands and letting saliva drip down with it.

The whole affair became reduced to a matter of gossip with appropriate shoulder-shrugs and gestures. No more than that until six days afterward when the next killing occurred.

Hyacinth Peuch brought the evil news. He shambled up to the little group seated outside the Boitavin hostelry, hung his head sidewise and grimaced at them.

"Much rain soon."

"Go away, fool," said one, impatiently.

"Plenty of rain. Wash the blood down." His giggle was squeaky and all slobber-mouthed. "Laverne's blood."

"Laverne has no blood," declared Lemaître, winking at the others.

This was more of an exaggeration than an untruth. Jules Laverne, a tall, gangling, moody character was so emaciated that he was known as *Le Pendu*, the hanging man.

His thin, beaky features bore a fancied resemblance to those of the late Seigneurs of Verne, and this — coupled with his surname — had bred in him the delusion that he had been deprived of his rightful inheritance by some gang of snide lawyers. Jules therefore comported himself at all times with the dour dignity of a diddled

duke, made periodic inspections of *his* property by touring the dilapidated Verne estate, and occasionally searched the civil records of nearby towns for an ancient marriage certificate which did not exist, the specific union in which he was interested having taken place only in bed.

"Lots of blood from Laverne," insisted Hyacinth, making himself sound gluttonous. "Near the meteor stone."

"Eh? *Where?*"

"All twisted up like the other one. I saw him." He dribbled at the recollection of it. "Rain soon!"

There was no sign of the promised downpour. Thin streamers from the sinking sun spread part-way across an otherwise clear sky. Despite this the group stirred uneasily, not liking undue positiveness in an idiot. And besides, if a second one were doomed to be smitten in the plantation, Laverne was as likely a subject as any and likelier than most. He was always mooching around the place, thinking of what might have been. They eyed Hyacinth, gazed at each other.

Before anyone could make remark Germaine Joubert hurried up, her little eyes swift and eager.

"Would you believe it? Incredible!" She paused to build up suspense, then: "That skinny cast-off Jules Laverne left his bicycle outside Tillie Benoit's cottage *all*

night! He didn't go home. Outrageous! What could she possibly see in him? Or he in her? And the blatancy of it, leaving it there like an advertisement of his presence, openly boasting of his misdeeds. If you ask me —"

"Nobody *is* asking you, Gabble-Gob," assured Hippolyte, who often swore that Germaine could take the heat off a dung-hill.

"Eh? Did I hear aright, Monsieur?"

"You did, Clatter-Trap. Take your wagging tongue elsewhere."

She tossed an indignant and self-righteous head. "Permit me to tell you, M. Lemaitre, that were it not for the few who are pure —"

"By compulsion rather than by choice," he said pointedly, and watched her hustle away with nose held high. To the others he opined, "Tillie Benoit would not smile upon Jules for fifty thousand francs. She is as warm and responsive as a lump of stone. Eventually she will give to the worms what she has denied to men."

"So?" encouraged one.

"But her cottage is by the path through the plantation. Therefore, I am going to the obelisk. Who comes?"

"I will."

Another grumbled, "In that case I might as well share this folly."

"Rain soon," reminded Hyacinth Peuch, showing yellow teeth.

"Wash the blood down."

"Rain, rain, rain," commented the grumbler. "Always he speaks of rain. As if we have not had enough." He spat on the ground vigorously. "The poor fool listens too much to miserable dirt-diggers who call themselves farmers. Invariably the weather is bringing them to the verge of bankruptcy. They will never be satisfied until they have rain every night and a shower of sewage Sundays. That is all they ask of God: rain and sewage. The *Banque de France* will provide the rest."

Thunderheads had appeared by the time they reached the inscribed stone: *Ici La Météorite de 1897*. The first drops were falling as they bore Laverne's crumpled figure into the square.

Napoleon Sif had another soaking, as did the two doctors. They mooned over the bizarre shape which appeared to have undergone some weird, unimaginable torment before seeking to establish new claims in another and higher estate. Every bone was broken, every joint dislocated. The torso had been turned around upon its hips. The head stared with ghastly incongruity over its own spine. The legs had been plaited like strings.

Lightning, ventured Sif, does not strike twice in the same place. One doctor pooh-poohed, saying it was a myth. The other declared

that lightning could and did hit ten times in one spot, especially if iron ore lay beneath. Anyway, Laverne's cadaver had been found precisely three meters from the site of Girandole's. It was the verdict as before: death from a bolt.

They buried Jules Laverne along with all his futile hopes and idle dreams. Sif returned to Pontaupis. The Boitavins trucked more booze from l'Orient. Hyacinth Peuch stamped dirt into the grave.

The Abbé Courtot spoke solemnly of the sin of aping one's betters, of how pride goes before a fall, of the tinsel tawdriness of worldly treasure. You can't, he asserted, take it with you—which piece of theistic information was translated by the pious Josephine as an authoritative injunction to use it while it is still warm.

The name of Laverne became added to that of Girandole as subject for morbid talk, and neither held any greater significance for forty-eight hours. This is only a short time, the reason for its brevity being that Laverne had not surrendered much juice, so that the third death followed fairly soon.

The very casualness of the next announcement enhanced its horror. It was the early evening of market day, the one occasion of

each week when Chateauverne considered itself wide open and roaring.

Emile Périè came picking his way across the square, dodging crates of chickens, stepping over snoring hogs. A giant of a man, hairy-chested, furry-armed, with thick, menacing eyebrows, he was called behind his back and at a safe distance *L'Encadreur*, the picture-framer. Despite the fact that he was the village blacksmith, this tag of another profession had clung to him since the memorable day when he'd become trapped by his buttocks in an ill-fitting privy and remained there until four rescuers arrived to tear him free. As he was a hard, taciturn man, that long-gone episode was the only matter about which he was sensitive.

Passing a wall shored up by glum drunks, and a fence that served as a perch for a small row of septuagenarian fanny-fans, Emile lumbered heavily into the auberge, signed to Baptiste and rumbled in a hoarse undertone, "Another!"

Baptiste Boitavin was puzzled, having seen him enter. "Emile, how can I serve you another when you have not yet had a first?"

"I will have a first now. A double cognac. It will be timely." Périè's hands made twisting motions as if they were screwing the neck of an invisible chicken. "There has been another."

A paleness came into Baptiste's face as he got it this time. Glancing at the other customers he leaned across the bar, lowered his voice. "Who?"

"Portale." The hands screwed again. "Like that. Round and round." He took a mouthful of cognac. "Burst open and squeezed dry, like a rotten orange."

"A-a-a-ah!" Baptiste drew back. "The telephone!"

"Let us suffer no more cretins from Pontaupis," suggested Périè. "The time for fumlbers has gone."

"I will summon the gendarmerie from Vannes. Where is the body? In the plantation?"

"No. I carried it here myself. Limp and flexible as wet string. It is in the chapel. Only the Widow Martin saw me." He remained there, leaning on the bar, nursing his drink and looking casual until Baptiste returned from the telephone and threw him a nod. His answering shrug meant, "Oh, well, that is that!" before he tramped out and went to his forge for a three-kilo hammer to lay by his bed.

For some mysterious reason that will never be solved, the first response to Baptiste's appeal for aid came in the form of an excited fire-squad with one twelve-meter ladder and three multiple pumps. Having cut the record time from Vannes by most of a minute, this circus arrived in the square with an uproarious clamor of bells and

gongs, scattering chickens, ducks, cabbages and gossipers. At once Chateauverne was in a turmoil, as willing helpers ran in all directions seeking the nonexistent conflagration. Among certain inebriates there was some talk of starting a suitable blaze to justify the expense and *élan* of the visit.

An hour later, after much shouting, arguing, waving of hands and repeated telephone calls to Vannes, the fire-fighters withdrew, taking with them three bottles of sour wine and earnest requests not to try Pontaupis, which ought to have been razed to the ground long ago.

Less spectacularly, a carload of gendarmes sneaked down a side-lane, pulled up outside the chapel. They went inside. Germaine Joubert saw them, drew others with her to the door. News soon began to fly from mouth to mouth, sobering the village.

"A third one."

"Like the others."

"It is Portale."

They were shocked even though this did not come quite so close to their own doorsteps, for Magnifico Portale was not a native of Chateauverne. Of foreign extraction, believed to be Iberian, he had wandered the countryside for years, earning a precarious living with the aid of a face full of love and a heart full of larceny. It was freely rumored that Magnifico had also fathered seventeen children,

eight of them by his wife. Despite this copulatory nonchalance, he was held in some small measure of esteem because, having brought joy to the formerly childless, this sin was no more than Christian charity.

The gendarmes took Magnifico away, more violently contorted than ever he'd been in life. The following mid-day they returned with long boxes, spades, and an official paper full of whereases and heretofores. They dug up Girandole and Laverne, packed them, drove them away to Vannes.

By this time Chateauverne had decided that twice is enough and three times too much. The superb marksmanship of lightning-bolts strained the credulity, especially seeing that nothing similar had occurred within living memory. A murderer must be on the loose, a maniac, an assassin.

Up went the oak shutters. Emile Périè's forge huffed and puffed and produced hammering noises as it strove to cope with a sudden boom in bigger and better bolts and bars. Armand Descoules had the streets to himself after eighty-three, was compelled to court Josephine within stone's throw of her door, and had to postpone his romantic intention of taking what little was left of her all.

On the fourth night after the bodies had been taken to Vannes, with speculation still rife and fear still stalking the darker lanes,

Baptiste Boitavin came to a decision.

"This savage has slaughtered only by night and in the plantation. That is a game at which two can play." He produced a heavy double-barreled gun. "Let us seek him and put an end to him."

"An excellent idea," approved Hippolyte Lemaître. "They slumber in Vannes with the porcine contentment of those well-fattened upon taxes. We could all be garrotted one at a time in alphabetical order before they awoke. We must take action ourselves."

There were murmurs of agreement. Only Timothée Clotaire, the morbid sexton from the Église, saw fit to oppose. He was the sort of man who invariably has a problem ready for every solution.

"What if this killer is not a human being?"

"We know he is not. He is inhuman." Baptiste spat on the floor. "Death to him!"

"What if he is non-human, such as a mad gorilla?"

"It is all the same. We shall blow him apart."

"Or perhaps a rogue elephant escaped from the *Cirque Nationale*?" Timothée persisted. His look reduced Baptiste's gun to matchstick size as mentally he measured it against an elephant.

"It can be a twenty-meter boa-constrictor for all I care," said Baptiste stoutly. He shouldered his weapon. "I am ready. Who

else is ready to go with me?"

Ten of them went out, brought back seven shotguns, one target pistol, one antique cutlass and one oak bludgeon formidably studded with brass nails. Filled with martial ferocity, this group set forth, followed at a distance by Hyacinth Peuch, curious and yellow-toothed.

For three hours they beat to and fro through the woods, hallooing to each other and urinating at frequent intervals, disturbing the owls and rabbits but sighting nothing maniacal or monstrous. One by one they gave up and went home, each man according to the measure of his patience.

At three o'clock in the morning Jean-Pierre Boitavin pummeled and thumped upon Hippolyte Lemaître's door, aroused him from bed.

"Ah, so! You are there! Are all the others back?"

"Probably." Hippolyte rubbed his eyes, too stupid with sleep to feel irritation. "What is the matter, Jean-Pierre?"

"Where is Baptiste?"

"He has not returned?" Hippolyte bleared at his clock, saw the lateness of the hour, was jerked into immediate wakefulness. He threw down a key. "Come inside and wait while I dress. We must seek Baptiste."

They found him exactly where they had expected, though neither had been willing to admit it to

the other. Near the meteor stone, his undischarged weapon beside a cold hand. He was scarcely recognizable.

A long box arrived from Vannes and bore Baptiste away under the inquisitive gaze of Roger Corbeau, a tousle-haired youngster of twelve. Roger was by nature so unappreciative of danger, even when it breathed down his neck, that already he had broken four bones, been stitched seven times, and had his life despaired of twice.

This was not because he was stuffed with foolhardy courage so much as the plain dumbness of the accident-prone. In other words, he had something in common with Hyacinth Peuch, only it was not so far developed. Among local connoisseurs of disaster, it was generally agreed that Roger was not long for this world because Jesus wanted him for a sun-beam.

In this respect the oracles were dead on the beam. Roger went obediently to bed, escaped via a dormer window, made straight for the plantation with the object of seeing for himself how it was done. His enthusiasm might have evaporated within the hour had he been kept waiting that long, but characteristically he picked a moment when service was prompt and efficient. In due course he was sought, discovered, scraped up and driven to Vannes in a short

container, under a steady down-pour.

Two gendarmes with loaded carbines remained to patrol the plantation night-times. Nothing happened in the next ten days, during which the weather stayed consistently warm and fine. Though bored with their task they kept dutifully to it, hearing nothing suspicious, seeing no cause for alarm.

At ten-twenty in the evening of the eleventh night, one of them went to Tillie Benoit's cottage for the coffee she prepared by official arrangement. He carried the can moodily, for the atmosphere had grown cold and indicative of coming rain. Moreover, he felt that the hot drinks could have been dispensed by someone comelier and more sociable than Tillie. She was a thin and frigid female who doled out the stuff as if she were conferring favors on lepers.

Nevertheless, he dallied with Tillie as long as he could, engaging her in conversation full of high morals and low purposes, keeping at her with the rugged determination of one who views every fortress as a challenge to conquest and, in any case, has to maintain a carefully cultivated reputation for being hotter than a tomcat full of curry.

It was almost an hour before he returned, defeated. Reaching the obelisk, he stared around.

"Marcel!"

Silence.

"Marcel!"

No response.

Loudly and with a slight quaver,
"MARCEL!"

A cool wind whispered through the trees. There was an acrid scent, faint but familiar and disturbing. He sniffed twice, thrice, trying to remember.

Blood!

The can dropped from his left hand, the carbine from his right. Abandoning Marcel, he whirled around and ran as he had never run before.

Forty men of the first field company of the 23me. Infantry of the Line marched in next afternoon, stationed themselves around the plantation with strict order to permit no entry. A newspaper reporter came from l'Orient, was sent by the Widow Martin in feckless pursuit of an imaginary massacre in Pontaupis, where one was long overdue. M. le Préfect de Morbihan visited Chateauverne in person, toured it three minutes, went away.

The next week was uneventful. Tillie Benoit gave the brush-off to forty soldiers, all of whom decided that their little dog mascot had a similar mother. M. le Capitaine, their commanding officer, had no opinion on this matter, he being well satisfied with an address where he could perform those car-

pet calisthenics so necessary to a warrior's health and spirits.

So far as anyone could discern, little else was being done about successive tragedies, but on the evening of Thursday a person presented himself at the auberge. He was a small, slight man, dapper, with a neat white goatee beard and peculiarly cold blue eyes.

"Are you Jean-Pierre Boita'vin?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

The other produced a card.

*Georges Fournier, Inspecteur.
Sûreté Générale.*

"Ah, the Sûreté!" said Jean-Pierre, overwhelmed. "It is not necessary to ask what brings you here."

Inspecteur Fournier nodded. "I have already cross-examined a number of people: the Abbé Courtot, Périè, Lemaître, Madame Martin and others. All those whose information might be helpful. Only two names remain on my list: yours and" — he took out a little notebook and consulted it — "one Hyacinth Peuch." The icy eyes bored into Jean-Pierre. "Kindly recite all you know of these affairs."

Obediently, Jean-Pierre recounted events with as much detail as he could bring to mind.

"It is the same story," commented Fournier. "Now, where is this Peuch? Where might he be found?"

"Right outside." Jean-Pierre pointed into the square. "That is he, the afflicted one playing with cabbage stalks."

"So! Is he capable of speech?"

"But certainly, Monsieur. It is only that he is shy of strangers." He thought a moment. "I will summon him here and give him a generous cognac. We will wait while it fumes through his bowels. Then you may buy him another. They will have a fraternal effect. After two cognacs he will kiss you upon the forehead with lavish distribution of sputum."

"Call him," ordered Fournier, accustomed to suffering in the line of duty.

Hyacinth came in with the dragged, lopsided gait of the half-witted. He absorbed a cognac slowly, suspiciously, having learned from village pranksters to beware those who come bearing gifts.

"Hyacinth knows when it will rain," remarked Jean-Pierre, flattering the tippler to put him at his ease. "If he says it will, it does. After each death he promised that the angels would weep, and they did!"

"Indeed?" Fournier studied the graveyard aspect of Hyacinth's molars. "Why should it rain after death?"

"Wash the blood down," informed Hyacinth. Finishing the cognac, he smacked thick lips, giggled.

"Wash it down where?"

"Into the roots."

"Ah, yes, the roots," agreed Fournier. He raised an inquiring eyebrow. "And which roots may these be?"

"The tree's." Hyacinth mooned at his empty glass.

"Give him another," Fournier ordered Jean-Pierre. "Now Monsieur Peuch, I am immensely interested in trees. Of which tree do you speak?"

Manifestly overcome by being addressed as Monsieur Peuch, the half-wit stammered, "The — the big one that squeezes rabbits."

A sharp gleam became visible in Fournier's eyes as he asked, "You have actually *seen* it do that?"

Hyacinth did not reply.

"Show me *how* it did it," invited Fournier, patiently.

"Go on, show the gentleman," Jean-Pierre encouraged. "They have never seen or heard of such a thing in Paris."

With some reluctance, Hyacinth put down his glass, stood up, extended both arms stiffly above his head, lifted his face to stare at the ceiling.

"Like this all day," he informed. "Cannot move because of the light, the terrible light. But at night —"

"Well?"

"Things run over roots, things with blood."

"Go on!" urged Fournier.

"Then . . ." He took a deep breath. His rigid, upraised arms trembled down their length. Suddenly he swept them toward his toes, bringing them down in a swift arc with all the force he could command. His fingers grabbed at the floor. The arms arose as his body straightened. He stood before them in ghastly imbecility, gurgling with pleasure while his hands made screwing motions and shook imaginary blood over his feet.

"Then soon," he said, "it rains."

Jean-Pierre tilted the cognac bottle. "I must have one myself." He swilled it down, stared at Hyacinth. "A tree! Name of a dog! How can there be such a tree?"

"And you have seen rabbits so killed?" said Fournier. "Often? For long?"

"Four-five-six years. Maybe more. I don't know." Hyacinth raised a hand level with his head. "Since the tree was as big as me."

"Does this happen frequently?" persisted Fournier.

"Only when it is dark and rain is coming," said Hyacinth, wise in the ways of the eerie. "No rain, no kill."

Fournier did not bother to inquire why the other had said nothing of this before now. He knew the answer: a fool soon learns not to be loud in his folly.

"You will take us to this tree?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

In gathering darkness, the deadly growth looked little different from other trees standing nearby. Just a thick, warty trunk with upraised limbs and a mass of broad, fleshy leaves. It was exactly eight meters from the obelisk.

Forty soldiers made an armed and leery ring around it, while Inspecteur Fournier carefully surveyed what could be seen in the light of half-a-dozen lanterns.

"You are certain this is the vegetable assassin?"

"Of a verity, Monsieur," asserted Hyacinth, pleased to find himself the center of attention without being mocked.

"There are no others?"

"No, Monsieur."

"The tale is utter folly," scoffed M. le Capitaine, thwarted in his design to spend that night snatching the village schoolmarm's intangibles. He strode martially through the ring, rapped his cane upon the hard trunk, spoke with authority. "No vegetable has sufficient sensitivity or speed of reaction. Neither can its limbs have any elasticity, therefore —"

His last word was cast away in an outward gust of wind and a tremendous *swi-i-i-ish!* as half-a-dozen great branches shot down and got him. Up he soared into mid-air, being wrung out like a damp dishcloth as he went. Not a scream came from him, not a cry. There were no sounds other than

those of cracking bones, bursting flesh and the patter-patter of glutinous droplets beneath.

The branches gave a final jerk which tossed the body away, then rose to their former position. Silent, impassive, satisfied, the tree stood in the dark.

Muttering grim profanities, someone cast the light of his lantern over the body. M. le Capitaine was in the punk of condition.

"Rain soon," promised Hyacinth Peuch.

Fournier came to life like one emerging from a bad dream. He took command with swiftly barked orders.

"Take this dead one away, right out of reach. Bring wood, faggots, twigs, oil, anything burnable. Throw it toward this monster. Be careful — do not go too near yourselves. Hurry, idiots, hurry!"

They burst into a frenzy of activity. Within short time a pyramid of flung fuel had grown until it reached the lowermost branches. Oil commandeered from Tillie

Benoit's lamps and stoves was tossed upon it. Fournier applied the flame in person. Fire caught, flickered, hesitated, suddenly roared to the heavens.

At that point the tree began to thrash around like a mad thing, scattering sparks and burning brands in all directions, full of violent and horrible life. They showed it no mercy. More and more fuel piled onto the flames, building up the pyre until the trunk of an adjacent tree exploded under pressure of boiling sap.

With the dawn there was nothing left but a circle of gray ash, from beneath which they dug charred remnants of roots and made a smaller fire of those. At ten o'clock, tired, dirty, dishevelled, they marched back to the square.

Fournier entered the auberge, washed, ordered breakfast. "It was a tree, a blood-drinking growth from none can guess where. I think that meteor brought with it a seed from a place that knows

(Continued on page 141)



WHO says Nature is impartial? In a small town in France, lightning struck into a sheep fold. Every black sheep was killed. All the white ones were left unharmed.

THE history of the world is the record of a man in quest of his daily bread and butter.

— H. W. Van Loon, *The Story of Mankind*



ROOT OF EVIL

By SHIRLEY JACKSON

Need money? Unpaid bills fill your mail box? Have collectors built a bomb shelter on your lawn? Does your salary check have all the elasticity of an ersatz girdle?

If so, don't despair. There's a sure way out. Consult the classified pages of your local newspaper. Somewhere down among the fine print, look for one of John Anderson's advertisements. It may be under Miscellaneous — although Business Opportunities would be a lot more accurate. . . .

*No other writer can dig into the human mind quite as well as Shirley Jackson. Those of you who remember her *The Lottery*, in *The New Yorker* magazine, will find this bit of satire equally as scathing.*

MISS SYBIL TURNER opened the envelope and took out the enclosure, glanced at it, started to set it down on a pile of similar notes, and then took it back and glanced at it again; then she giggled. "Listen to this, Mabe," she said, and her friend Mabel Johnson, working at a similar desk, but typing at the moment, said, "Wait a minute," and finished her line before looking up. "What?" she said.

Sybil Turner was still holding the letter. "Listen," she said. "Here's a guy wants us to run an ad for money."

Mabel laughed shortly. "*That's* no way to get it," she said, looking down again at her typewriter. "Better he should go to work."

"No, *listen*. He says, 'Money to give away' and he's got a post office box to write to and two dollars enclosed for the ad to run all week, and everything. Can you imagine?"

"He must be crazy," said Mabel Johnson.

"Crazy is *it*," Sybil Turner agreed devoutly.

"Here's something funny," Mr. George Carter commented to his wife the next evening. He was quietly reading his evening paper and his wife was doing needlepoint; they sat peacefully in front of their living-room fire with the children sound asleep upstairs. "Here's a real good one," George Carter said again, and his wife looked up patiently. "'Money to give away,'" George Carter read, once he was sure he had her attention. "Right here in the paper. People think of the screwiest things."

"But so many people are taken in by a thing like that," Mrs. Carter said in her soft voice. "People writing to him, hoping."

"Paper has no right to print a thing like that," George Carter said.

Mrs. Carter started to speak and then paused, her eyes lifted to the ceiling and her mouth open, listening. Then, reassured, she looked again at her husband and said, "Probably they run a thing like that to test how many people

read the classified ads. Wouldn't that be it?"

Mr. Carter was obviously sorry that he had not thought of this himself. "Maybe so," he said grudgingly. "Wish they'd send some of that money along to us, though. *We* could use it."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Carter agreed with a sigh. "With prices the way they are, and meat. . . ." She dropped her scissors onto the arm of the chair, folded her hands in her lap, and sighed again. "George," she demanded, as one who begins a long and intricate story, "just try to guess what they had the nerve to ask for lamb today? *Lamb!*"

"Things are pretty bad." Mr. Carter hastily elevated the paper before his face. "Screwiest idea I ever heard," he muttered.

"The fact is perfectly plain," Mrs. Harmon said severely to her daughter. "Your own mother's sewing, weeks and weeks of work, isn't good enough for you to wear out in public. So you can go without."

"Without clothes?" said Mildred sullenly.

"You know *perfectly* well what I mean. You picked out the style of this dress yourself and I spent three weeks making it and it looks just beautiful on you and —"

"I *didn't* pick out the style," Mildred said.

Her mother sighed. "I sometimes think you are the *most* un-

reasonable —" she said.

"I wanted the dress in the *store*," Mildred wailed. "Not for you to *copy* it."

Her mother took a deep breath, as of one determined to be reasonable in spite of everything. "Dresses in the store cost money," she said. "This dress cost less than —"

"If I only *had* some *money*," Mildred said hopelessly. "I'll write to this guy in the paper says he's giving money away. I'll get *married* or something." She tossed her head defiantly. "*Then* I can have dresses."

Mrs. Harmon shifted her ground abruptly and began to cry. "Three weeks I took to make that dress," she said mournfully, "and now it's not good enough for you and you want to run away and get married, and all these years I've tried to keep you looking nice and worked to buy pretty things and spent three weeks —"

"Oh, *Mother*," said Mildred. She blinked to keep tears out of her own eyes. "I'm not going to get married, *honestly*. And the dress is *beautiful*. I'll *wear* it, honestly I will, I'll wear it all the *time*."

"It's no good," her mother said. "I know all the other girls —"

"It's *beautiful*," Mildred said. "It's just like the one in the store and it's the prettiest dress I ever saw, and I'm going to put it on *right now*."

Mrs. Harmon lifted her face

briefly from her handkerchief. "Watch out for that pin I left in the shoulder," she said.

"For the last time I seem to find it necessary to say," Helen Nelson said emphatically, "that I do not desire to go to any movie."

"But —"

"Indeed I do not," Helen said. She set her shoulders and looked extraordinarily stern. "Movies last night," she said. "Movies the night before. I'm so tired of going to movies I don't know what to do. And anyway, there's nothing left to see."

"But Helen —"

"*Some* girls," said Helen pointedly, "like to go to the theatre. *Some* girls like to go to a night club and dance. *Some* girls even like to ride in taxis and wear gardenias. Of course *I*'m always happy at the movies though. Good old Helen."

"I can't afford —"

"*That* point," said Helen delicately, "is the one I was too polite to refer to. Let me just remark, however, that I know of only one person who has not got enough initiative to get out and *do* something for himself. He works heart and soul for this organization and comes around every week and says 'Thank you' to them so gratefully for — what is it they pay you? Seventeen cents a week?"

"Now listen —"

"*Some* men are making good

money at twenty-four. *Some* men have good jobs and *they're* not afraid to assert themselves and keep up with other people and not let everyone else get ahead of them and *their* girls don't go to movies every night in the week and see the same old —"

"But when I've worked there a little —"

"And *some* men," Helen continued icily, "do not expect girls to wait around until they are sixty-five and drawing old-age pensions before they can get married."

"Well, to hear you talk —"

"Here," said Helen in her sweetest voice, "perhaps *this* will help you. Here, in the classified section of tonight's paper. Perhaps *this* is the lucky break you've been waiting for. Let me just give you this copy of tonight's paper, since I am sure it would take your entire weekly earnings to buy one for yourself."

"You don't have to talk like —"

"And now good-night," said Helen graciously.

"He shouldn't of done it, that's all," said Donald Hart, who was fifteen years old and felt utterly responsible for his mother and ten-year-old brother. "He's going to get us all in trouble, that's what."

"Dickie," said his mother, "tell me again what happened."

"I wrote the man like I said," Dickie told her. He looked nerv-

ously from his mother to his brother. "I didn't think he'd *answer*," he said, his voice trembling. "I never thought he'd *answer*."

"I'm afraid we ought to send it back to him," his mother said. She had tight hold of the bill and twisted it between her fingers as though afraid to set it down.

"Well, *we* haven't really done anything," Donald said. "Maybe we ought to tell the cops."

"No, no," said his mother hastily. "That's the *most* important thing of all. We're not going to tell *anybody*, you hear? Donald?"

"Okay," said Donald, "but maybe he's a gangster or —"

"Dickie, you hear me?"

"Yes, but suppose they catch us?"

"We haven't *done* anything," his mother said again. "I don't even know if it's any good. *I* don't dare take a five-hundred-dollar bill into the bank and ask them if it's any good."

"Counterfeit," said Donald wisely.

"But what if it isn't?" said his mother. "Suppose it's a good bill?" She sighed, and looked down at the bill. "They have our address, of course."

"I had to put the *address* in for him to know where to *send* the money," Dickie said miserably.

His mother reached a sudden decision. "I'll tell you what we'll do," she said. "We'll put it right in Dickie's penny bank. Then, if

they come and ask us about it, we can say we just put it away for safekeeping. And if no one comes after a while, why, I guess it's ours. But don't *tell* anyone."

"Don't you tell, Dickie," his brother said warningly.

"Don't *you* tell."

"*You're* the one always blabs out everything."

"I was the one thought of writing him in the first place, wasn't I?"

"And look what you got us into."

"Boys," said their mother warningly. "We've got enough trouble without you quarrelling. Now, Dickie, there's one more thing I want you to do."

"What?"

"Just in case it *is* all right," his mother said, "I want you to sit right down and write that man a nice letter saying thank you."

"Oh, *Mother*."

"No one is ever going to say my boys weren't brought up right," she said firmly.

Mr. John Anderson let himself into his apartment, carrying his mail, and sighed deeply as he closed the door behind him. He was hungry, and tired, and his day had gone badly. He had succeeded in persuading a newsboy to accept ten dollars, and he had slipped a hundred-dollar bill into the cup of a blind beggar, but otherwise he had had no success

at all. He winced when he remembered the way the truck driver had spoken to him, and the thought of the giggling shopgirls made him almost ill.

He took off his coat and sat down wearily in the easy chair. In a few minutes he would take care of the mail and then have a shower and dress and go out to some nice restaurant for dinner; he would take a vacation for this evening and carry only enough to take care of his own expenses. He could not decide whether to take a taxi uptown to the fine steak house, or to go to the seafood restaurant nearby and have a lobster. Lobster, he rather thought.

After he had rested for a minute, he went to the desk and turned over the mail he had brought home with him. Absently, he stared at the stacks of ten-dollar bills in the pigeonholes of the desk, the fives, the fifties, the five-hundreds. The mail under his hand was typical — one offensively humorous request for a million dollars, badly written in capital letters and unfortunately including no return address; one circular from a loan company featuring on the envelope a man pointing and the statement "YOU need no longer worry about money." One terse note from the newspaper saying that his week was up today, and asking if he desired to continue his ad. One

Continued on page 140



They were sitting
on the train when
Livvy asked...

what if

By Isaac Asimov

...and the little
man who sat
across from them...



illustrator: David Stone



... showed them
what if they had
never met ...

Whenever the role of competent writers of science fiction is taken, Isaac Asimov places high on the list. Not only have many of his short stories been anthologized, but his novels "The Stars Like Dust" and "Pebble in the Sky" were brought out by Doubleday & Co. — publishers not given to grabbing just anything that comes along!

While Dr. Asimov's forte is the robot's place in tomorrow's universe (Earth is pretty small potatoes in stories of the future!), he drops Metal Man this time to give you a tender and compelling tale of a married couple who wondered "what if" they had never met — and who found the answer to be strangely rewarding. . . .

NORMAN and Livvy were late, naturally, since catching a train is always a matter of last-minute delays, so they had to take the only available seat in the coach. It was the one toward the front; the one with nothing before it but the seat that faced wrong-way with its back hard against the front partition. While Norman heaved the suitcase onto the rack, Livvy found herself chafing a little.

If a couple took the wrong-way seat before them, they would be staring self-consciously into each others' faces all the hours it would take to reach New York, or else, which was scarcely better, they would have to erect synthetic barriers of newspaper. Still, there was no use in taking a chance on there being another unoccupied double seat elsewhere in the train.

Norman didn't seem to mind and that was a little disappointing to Livvy. Usually, they held their moods in common. That, Norman claimed, was why he remained sure that he had married the right girl.

He would say, "We fit each other, Livvy, and that's the key fact. When you're doing a jigsaw puzzle and one piece fits another, that's it. There are no other possibilities, and of course there are no other girls."

And she would laugh and say, "If you hadn't been on the streetcar that day, you would probably never have met me. What would you have done then?"

"Stayed a bachelor. Naturally. Besides, I would have met you through Georgette another day."

"It wouldn't have been the same."

"Sure it would."

"No, it wouldn't. Besides, Georgette would never have introduced me. She was interested in you herself, and she's the type who knows better than to create a possible rival."

"What nonsense."

Livvy asked her favorite question: "Norman, what if you had been one minute later at the streetcar corner and had taken the next car? What *do* you suppose would have happened?"

"And what if fish had wings and all of them flew to the top of the mountains? What would we

have to eat on Fridays then?"

But we *had* caught the streetcar and fish *didn't* have wings, so that now they were married five years and ate fish on Friday. And because they had been married five years, they were going to celebrate by spending a week in New York.

Then she remembered the present problem. "I wish we could have found some other seat."

Norman said, "Sure. So do I. But no one has taken it yet, so we'll have relative privacy as far as Providence anyway."

Livvy was unconsoled and felt justified at the fact when a plump little man walked down the central aisle of the coach. Now, where had he come from? The train was half-way between Boston and Providence, and if he had had a seat why hadn't he kept it? She took out her vanity and considered her reflection. She had a theory that if she ignored the little man, he would pass by. So she concentrated on her light brown hair which, in the rush of catching the train, had become disarranged just a little, at her blue eyes and at her little mouth with the plump lips which Norman said looked like a permanent kiss.

Not bad, she thought.

Then she looked up and the little man was in the seat opposite. He caught her eye and grinned

widely. A series of lines curled about the edges of his smile. He lifted his hat hastily and put it down beside him on top of the little black box he had been carrying. A circle of white hair instantly sprang up stiffly about the large bald spot that made the center of his skull a desert.

She could not help smiling back a little, but then she caught sight of the black box again and the smile faded. She yanked at Norman's elbow.

Norman looked up from his newspaper. He had startlingly dark eyebrows that almost met above the bridge of his nose, giving him a formidable first appearance. But they and the dark eyes beneath bent upon her now with only the usual look of pleased and somewhat amused affection.

He said, "What's up?" He did not look at the plump little man opposite.

Livvy did her best to indicate what she saw by a little unobtrusive gesture of her hand and head. But the little man was watching and she felt a fool, since Norman simply stared at her blankly.

Finally, she pulled him closer and whispered, "Don't you see what's printed on his box?"

She looked again as she said it and there was no mistake. It was not very prominent, but the light caught it slantingly and it was a slightly more glistening area on a

black background. In flowing script, it said, "What If."

The little man was smiling again. He nodded his head rapidly and pointed to the words and then to himself several times over.

Norman said in an aside, "Must be his name."

Livvy replied, "Oh, how could that be anybody's name?"

Norman put his paper aside, "I'll show you." He leaned over and said, "Mister If?"

The little man looked at him eagerly.

"Do you have the time, Mr. If?"

The little man took out a large watch from his vest pocket and displayed the dial.

"Thank you, Mr. If," said Norman. And again in a whisper, "See, Livvy."

He would have returned to his paper, but the little man was opening his box and raising a finger periodically as he did so, to enforce their attention. It was just a slab of frosted glass that he removed — about six by nine inches in length and width and perhaps an inch thick. It had beveled edges, rounded corners and was completely featureless. Then he took out a little wire stand on which the glass slab fitted comfortably. He rested the combination on his knees and looked proudly at them.

Livvy said, with sudden excitement, "Heavens, Norman, it's a

picture of some sort."

Norman bent close. Then he looked at the little man. "What's this? A new kind of television?"

The little man shook his head and Livvy said, "No, Norman, it's *us*."

"What?"

"Don't you see? That's the streetcar we met on. There you are in the back seat wearing that old fedora I threw away three years ago. And that's Georgette and myself getting on. The fat lady's in the way. Now! Can't you see us?"

He muttered, "It's some sort of illusion."

"But you see it too, don't you? That's why he calls this 'What If'. It will *show* us what if. What if the streetcar hadn't swerved . . ."

She was sure of it. She was very excited and very sure of it. As she looked at the picture in the glass slab, the late afternoon sunshine grew dimmer, and the inchoate hum of the passengers around and behind them began fading.

How she remembered that day. Norman knew Georgette and had been about to surrender his seat to her when the car swerved and threw Livvy into his lap. It was such a ridiculously corny situation, but it had worked. She had been so embarrassed that he was forced first into gallantry and then into conversation. An introduction from Georgette was not even necessary. By the time they

got off the streetcar, he knew where she worked.

She could still remember Georgette glowering at her, sulkily forcing a smile when they themselves separated. Georgette said, "Norman seems to like you."

Livvy replied, "Oh, don't be silly! He was just being polite. But he is nice-looking, isn't he?"

It was only six months after that that they married.

And now here was that same streetcar again with Norman and herself and Georgette. As she thought that, the smooth train noises, the rapid clack-clack of the wheels vanished completely. Instead, she was in the swaying confines of the streetcar. She had just boarded it with Georgette at the previous stop.

Livvy shifted weight with the swaying of the streetcar, as did forty others, sitting and standing, all to the same monotonous and rather ridiculous rhythm. She said, "Somebody's motioning at you, Georgy. Do you know him?"

"At me?" Georgette directed a deliberately casual glance over her shoulder. Her artificially-long eyelashes flickered. She said, "I know him a little. What do you suppose he wants?"

"Let's find out," said Livvy. She felt pleased and a little wicked. Georgette had a well-known habit of hoarding her male acquaintances, and it was rather fun

to annoy her this way. And besides, this one seemed quite . . . interesting.

She snaked past the line of standees and Georgette followed without enthusiasm. It was just as Livvy arrived opposite the young man's seat that the streetcar lurched heavily as it rounded a curve. Livvy snatched desperately in the direction of the straps. Her fingertips caught and she held on. It was a long moment before she could breathe. For some reason, it had seemed that there were no straps close enough to be reached. Somehow, she felt that by all the laws of Nature she should have fallen.

The young man did not look at her. He was smiling at Georgette and rising from his seat. He had astonishing eyebrows which gave him a rather competent and self-confident appearance. Livvy decided that she definitely liked him.

Georgette was saying, "Oh no, don't bother. We're getting off in about two stops."

They did. Livvy said, "I thought we were going to Sach's."

"We are. There's just something I remember having to attend to here. It won't take but a minute."

"Next stop, Providence!" The loud-speakers were blaring. The train was slowing, and the world of the past had shrunk itself into the glass slab once more. The

little man was still smiling at them.

Livvy turned to Norman. She felt a little frightened. "Were you through all that, too?"

He said, "What happened to the time? We *can't* be reaching Providence yet?" He looked at his watch. "I guess we are." Then, to Livvy, "You didn't fall that time."

"Then you *did* see it?" She frowned, "Now, that's like Georgette. I'm sure there was no reason to get off the streetcar except to prevent my meeting you. How long had you known Georgette before then, Norman?"

"Not very long. Just enough to be able to recognize her at sight and to feel that I ought to offer her my seat."

Livvy curled her lip.

Norman grinned, "You can't be jealous of a might-have-been, kid. Besides, what difference would it have made? I'd have been sufficiently interested in you to work out a way of meeting you."

"You didn't even look at me."

"I hardly had the chance."

"Then how would you have met me?"

"Some way. I don't know how. But you'll admit this is a rather foolish argument we're having."

They were leaving Providence. Livvy felt a trouble in her mind. The little man had been following their whispered conversation with only the loss of his smile to show

that he understood. She said to him, "Can you show us more?"

Norman interrupted, "Wait now, Livvy. What are you going to try to do?"

She said, "I want to see our wedding day. What it would have been if I had caught the strap."

Norman was visibly annoyed, "Now that's not fair. We might not have been married on the same day, you know."

But she said, "Can you show it to me, Mr. If?" and the little man nodded.

The slab of glass was coming alive again, glowing a little. Then the light collected and condensed into figures. A tiny sound of organ music was in Livvy's ears, without there actually being sound.

Norman said with relief, "Well, there I am. That's our wedding. Are you satisfied?"

The train sounds were disappearing again and the last thing Livvy heard was her own voice saying, "Yes, there *you* are. But where am *I*?"

Livvy was well back in the pews. For a while, she had not expected to attend at all. In the past months she had drifted further and further away from Georgette without quite knowing why. She had heard of her engagement only through a mutual friend and, of course, it was to Norman. She remembered very clearly that day, six months ago, when she had first

seen him on the streetcar. It was the time Georgette had so quickly snatched her out of sight. She had met him since on several occasions, but each time Georgette was with him, standing between.

Well, she had no cause for resentment; the man was certainly none of hers. Georgette she thought looked more beautiful than she really was. And *he* was very handsome indeed.

She felt sad and rather empty, as though something had gone wrong; something which she could not quite outline in her mind. Georgette had moved up the aisle without seeming to see her, but earlier she had caught *his* eyes and smiled at him. Livvy thought he had smiled in return.

She heard the words distantly as they drifted back to her, "I now pronounce you —"

The noise of the train was back. A woman swayed down the aisle, herding a little boy back to their seat. There were intermittent bursts of girlish laughter from a set of four teen-age girls half-way down the coach. A conductor hurried past on some mysterious errand.

Livvy was frozenly aware of it all.

She sat there, staring straight ahead, while the trees outside blended into a fuzzy, furious green and the telephone poles galloped past.

She said, "It was *she* you married."

He stared at her for a moment and then one side of his mouth quirked a little. He said, lightly, "I didn't really, Olivia. You're still my wife, you know. Just think about it for a few minutes."

She turned to him. "Yes, you married me — because I fell in your lap. If I hadn't, you would have married Georgette. If she hadn't wanted you, you would have married someone else. You would have married *anybody*. So much for your jigsaw puzzle pieces."

Norman said very slowly, "Well — I'll — be — darned!" He put both hands to his head and smoothed down the straight hair over his ears where it had a tendency to tuft up. For the moment it gave him the appearance of trying to hold his head together. He said, "Now, look here, Livvy, you're making a silly fuss over a stupid magician's trick. You can't blame me for something I haven't done."

"You would have done it."

"How do you know?"

"You've seen it."

"I've seen a ridiculous piece of — of hypnotism, I suppose." His voice suddenly raised itself into anger. He turned to the little man opposite. "Off with you, Mr. If, or whatever your name is. Get out of here. We don't want you. Get out before I throw your little trick

out the window and you after it."

Livvy yanked at his elbow, "Stop it. *Stop it!* You're in a crowded train."

The little man shrank back into the corner of the seat as far as he might go and held his little black bag behind him. Norman looked at him, then at Livvy, then at the elderly lady across the way who was regarding him with patent disapproval.

He turned pink and bit back a pungent remark. They rode in frozen silence to and through New London.

Fifteen minutes past New London, Norman said, "Livvy!"

She said nothing. She was looking out the window but saw nothing but the glass.

He said again, "Livvy! Livvy! Answer me!"

She said, dully, "What do you want?"

He said, "Look, this is all nonsense. I don't know how the fellow does it, but even granting it's legitimate, you're not being fair. Why stop where you did? Suppose I *had* married Georgette, do you suppose *you* would have stayed single? For all I know, you were already married at the time of my supposed wedding. Maybe that's why I married Georgette."

"I wasn't married."

"How do you know?"

"I would have been able to tell. I knew what my own thoughts were."

"Then you would have been married within the next year."

Livvy grew angrier. The fact that a sane remnant within her clamored at the unreason of her anger did not soothe her. It irritated her further, instead. She said, "And if I did, it would be no business of yours, certainly."

"Of course it wouldn't. But it would make the point that in the world of reality we can't be held responsible for the 'what ifs'."

Livvy's nostrils flared. She said nothing.

Norman said, "Look! You remember the big New Year's celebration at Winnie's place year before last?"

"I certainly do. You spilled a keg of alcohol all over me."

"That's beside the point, and besides it was only a cocktail shaker's worth. What I'm trying to say is that Winnie is just about your best friend and had been long before you married me."

"What of it?"

"Georgette was a good friend of hers too, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"All right, then. You and Georgette would have gone to the party regardless of which one of you I married. I would have had nothing to do with it. Let him show us the party as it would have been if I had married Georgette, and I'll bet you'd be there with either your fiancé or your husband."

Livvy hesitated. She felt honestly afraid of just that.

He said, "Are you afraid to take the chance?"

And that of course decided her. She turned on him furiously, "No, I'm not! And I hope I *am* married. There's no reason I should pine for you. What's more, I'd like to see what happens when you spill the shaker all over Georgette. She'll fill both your ears for you and in public, too. I know *her*. Maybe you'll see a certain difference in the jigsaw pieces then." She faced forward and crossed her arms angrily and firmly across her chest.

Norman looked across at the little man but there was no need to say anything. The glass slab was on his lap already. The sun slanted in from the west and the white foam of hair that topped his head was edged with pink.

Norman said, tensely, "Ready?"

Livvy nodded, and let the noise of the train slide away again.

Livvy stood, a little flushed with recent cold, in the doorway. She had just removed her coat, with its sprinkling of snow, and her bare arms were still rebelling at the touch of open air.

She answered the shouts that greeted her with "Happy New Years" of her own, raising her voice to make herself heard over the squealing of the radio. Georgette's shrill tones were almost the

first thing she heard upon entering and now she steered toward her. She hadn't seen Georgette, or Norman, in weeks.

Georgette lifted an eyebrow, a mannerism she had lately cultivated, and said, "Isn't anyone with you, Olivia?" Her eyes swept the immediate surroundings and then returned to Livvy.

Livvy said, indifferently, "I think Dick will be around later. There was something or other he had to do first." She felt as indifferent as she sounded.

Georgette smiled tightly, "Well, Norman's here. That ought to keep you from being lonely, dear. At least, it's turned out that way before."

And as she said so, Norman sauntered in from the kitchen. He had a cocktail shaker in his hand and the rattling of ice cubes castanetted his words, "Line up, you rioting revelers, and get a mixture which will really revel your riots — Why, Livvy!"

He walked toward her, grinning his welcome. "Where've you been keeping yourself? I haven't seen you in twenty years, seems like. What's the matter? Doesn't Dick want anyone else to see you?"

"Fill my glass, Norman," said Georgette sharply.

"Right away," he said, not looking at her. "Do you want one too, Livvy? I'll get you a glass." He turned, and everything happened at once.

Livvy cried, "Watch out!" She saw it coming; even had a vague feeling that all this had happened before, but it played itself out inexorably. His heel caught the edge of the carpet; he lurched, tried to right himself, and lost the cocktail shaker. It seemed to jump out of his hands, and a pint of ice-cold liquor drenched Livvy from shoulder to hem.

She stood there, gasping. The noises muted about her, and for a few intolerable moments she made futile brushing gestures at her gown, while Norman kept repeating, "Damnation!" in rising tones.

Georgette said, coolly, "It's too bad, Livvy. Just one of those things. I imagine the dress can't be very expensive."

Livvy turned and ran. She was in the bedroom, which was at least empty and relatively quiet. By the light of the fringe-shaded lamp on the dresser, she poked among the coats on the bed, looking for her own.

Norman had come in behind her. "Look, Livvy, don't pay any attention to what she said. I'm really devilishly sorry. I'll pay —"

"That's all right. It wasn't your fault." She blinked rapidly and didn't look at him. "I'll just go home and change."

"Are you coming back?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Look, Livvy . . ." His warm fingers were on her shoulders —

Livvy felt a queer tearing sensation deep inside her, as though she were ripping away from clinging cobwebs and —

—and the train noises were back.

Something *did* go wrong with the time when she was in there — in the slab. It was deep twilight now. The train-lights were on. But it didn't matter. She seemed to be recovering from the wrench inside her.

Norman was rubbing his eyes with thumb and forefinger, "What happened?"

Livvy said, "It just ended. Suddenly."

Norman said, uneasily, "You know, we'll be putting into New Haven soon." He looked at his watch and shook his head.

Livvy said, wonderingly, "You spilled it on me."

"Well, so I did in real life."

"But in real life I was your wife. You ought to have spilled it on Georgette this time. Isn't that queer?" But she was thinking of Norman pursuing her; his hands on her shoulders. . . .

She looked up at him, and said with warm satisfaction, "I wasn't married."

"No, you weren't. But was that Dick Reinhardt you were going around with?"

"Yes."

"You weren't planning to marry him, were you, Livvy?"

"Jealous, Norman?"

Norman looked confused. "Of that? Of a slab of glass? Of course not."

"I don't think I would have married him."

Norman said, "You know, I wish it hadn't ended when it did. There was something that was about to happen, I think." He stopped, then added slowly, "It was as though I would rather have done it to anybody else in the room."

"Even to Georgette."

"I wasn't giving two thoughts to Georgette. You don't believe me, I suppose."

"Maybe I do." She looked up at him. "I've been silly, Norman. Let's — let's live our real life. Let's not play with all the things that just might have been."

But he caught her hands. "No, Livvy. One last time. Let's see what we would have been doing right now. Right now, Livvy! This very minute! If I had married Georgette."

Livvy was a little frightened. "Let's not, Norman." She was thinking of his eyes, smiling hungrily at her as he held the shaker, while Georgette stood beside her, unregarded. She didn't *want* to know what happened afterward. She just wanted this life now, this *good* life.

New Haven came and went.

Norman said again, "I want to try, Livvy."

She said, "If you want to, Norman." She decided fiercely that it wouldn't matter. Nothing would matter. Her hands reached out and encircled his arm. She held it tightly, and while she held it she thought: nothing in the make-believe can take him from me.

Norman said to the little man, "Set 'em up again."

In the yellow light, the process seemed to be slower. Gently, the frosted slab cleared, like clouds being torn apart and dispersed by an unfelt wind.

Norman was saying, "There's something wrong. That's just the two of us, exactly as we are now."

He was right. Two little figures were sitting in a train on the seats which were furthest toward the front. The field was enlarging now — they were merging into it. Norman's voice was distant and fading.

"It's the same train," he was saying. "The window in back is cracked just as —"

Livvy was blindingly happy. She said, "I wish we were in New York."

He said, "It will be less than an hour, darling." Then he said, "I'm going to kiss you." He made a movement, as though he were about to begin.

"Not here! Oh, Norman, people are looking."

Norman drew back. He said,

"We should have taken a taxi."

"From Boston to New York?"

"Sure. The privacy would have been worth it."

She laughed, "You're funny when you try to act ardent."

"It isn't an act." His voice was suddenly a little somber. "It's not just an hour, you know. I feel as though I've been waiting five years."

"I do, too."

"Why couldn't I have met you first? It was such a waste."

"Poor Georgette." Livvy sighed.

Norman moved impatiently, "Don't be sorry for her, Livvy. We never really made a go of it. She was glad to get rid of me."

"I know that. That's why I say 'Poor Georgette.' I'm just sorry for her for not being able to appreciate what she had."

"Well, see to it that *you* do," he said. "See to it that you're immensely appreciative, infinitely appreciative — or more than that, see that you're at least half as appreciative as I am of what *I've* got."

"Or else you'll divorce me, too?"

"Over my dead body," said Norman.

Livvy said, "It's all so strange. I keep thinking: what if you hadn't spilt the cocktails on me that time at the party. You wouldn't have followed me out; you wouldn't have told me; I wouldn't have known. It would

have been so different . . . everything."

"Nonsense. It would have been just the same. It would have all happened another time."

"I wonder," said Livvy softly.

Train noises merged into train noises. City lights flickered outside and the atmosphere of New York was about them. The coach was astir with travellers dividing the baggage among themselves.

Livvy was an island in the turmoil until Norman shook her.

She looked at him and said, "The jigsaw pieces fit after all."

He said, "Yes."

She put a hand on his. "But it wasn't good just the same. I was very wrong. I thought that because we had each other, we should have all the *possible* each others. But all the *possibles* are none of our business. The real is enough. Do you know what I mean?"

He nodded.

She said, "There are millions of other *what-if's*. I don't want to know what happened in any of

them. I'll never say 'What if' again."

Norman said, "Relax, dear. Here's your coat." And he reached for the suitcases.

Livvy said, with sudden sharpness, "Where's Mr. If?"

Norman turned slowly to the empty seat that faced them. Together they scanned the rest of the coach.

"Maybe," Norman said, "he went into the next coach."

"But why? Besides, he wouldn't leave his hat." And she bent to pick it up.

Norman said, "What hat?"

And Livvy stopped, her fingers hovering over nothingness. She said, "It was here—I almost touched it." She straightened and said, "Oh, Norman, what if —"

Norman put a finger on her mouth, "Darling . . ."

She said, "I'm sorry. Here, let me help you with the suitcases."

The train dived into the tunnel beneath Park Avenue, and the noise of the wheels rose to a roar.

ROOT OF EVIL

(Continued from page 127)

letter signed by three hundred children in the Roosevelt Grade School, saying thank you for the television set he had given the school. One postcard reading: "Dear Sir, If you really mean it please send ten dollars return mail." This last he answered, addressing the envelope quickly and enclosing, without counting, a

handful of ten-dollar bills.

Then he sat down at the desk, looking with desperation and frustration at the stacks of money. Finally, in a fury, he took one of the piles of ten-dollar bills and threw it wildly against the opposite wall, where it hit and scattered until ten-dollar bills floated about the room.

"In the name of heaven," he wailed, "what am I going to *do* with it all?"

Hyacinth Peuch

(Continued from page 121)

no light." He pondered a little while, ended, "Well, we have seen the last of this vampire. Chateauverne will be troubled no more."

"I am not so sanguine, Monsieur," offered Jean-Pierre. "In Chateauverne, if one is not being strangled or used for bouillon, another is being robbed of forty francs, or another is fastened to his throne like a hairy and impotent emperor." He reached for a bottle. "You will have a cognac, perhaps?"

"But certainly."

The remainder has yet to be told, may never be told. A living speck came from the far reaches of space, took root near Chateauverne. Being phototropic, it posed by day like one hypnotized, but by night it grew and moved and drank blood and grew again until it was destroyed.

Hyacinth Peuch, being simple, got no credit whatsoever. Indeed, he was severely criticized for holding his tongue so long, despite the fact that none would have taken note if he had permitted it to wag.

Even an idiot can be sensitive, which is why he continued to invite no insults the following Spring. Returning from a certain secluded spot where with the aid

of adequate if cross-eyed sight he sometimes gained instruction in the twin arts of courtship and conquest, he saw a hairy chestnut inching across his path.

It was a small, brown, shiny thing with trembling cilia. Moving slowly, laboriously, it got over the path, across the grass verge, tumbled helplessly down one side of a ditch, climbed up the other, settled itself into the swell of the bank. There, with cilia feebly waving, it buried itself from sight.

At odd times months apart he came back to this spot, but the bank spurted new growths lavishly, and there was no way of telling the native from the alien. The end of October arrived before he noticed one day under a meter-high shrub a dead mouse, twisted, wrinkled and dry.

Chateauverne received fair warning in the form of two words spoken to the Widow Martin.

"Rain soon." He chuckled with sloppy gobbling sounds, ogling her sidewise and swinging a drip from his nose.

Now the Widow Martin — being a healthy, vigorous woman conscious of her solitary state — was quietly and innocently enjoying her own desires. To her, the unappetizing spectacle of Hyacinth was as welcome as that of a dead rat at a banquet.

So she growled, "Go away oaf!" and fidgeted her hungry backside and forgot him.

FANTASY BOOKS

BLACK EASTER, by James Blish, Doubleday, \$3.95

Damon Knight once called the prose of some of Blish's early stories, "tortuous and knob-jointed. Nearly every sentence has too much information packed into it; and since most of it is unnecessary information, the result is the same as if it were noise."

By unrelenting work Blish has since forged a style that is compact, unambiguous, and clean limbed, free of noise and repetition. He has become especially adept at telling just enough of an incident so that the reader can deduce the rest, then taking the next step in the story, rather than following a wearisome point by point path.

Add to this Blish's remarkable erudition in scientific, religious, and other matters, his expert's standing in several fields, and his insistence on writing seriously and at the top of his ability in books that count, and the result is a formidable talent.

Nowhere except in *Doctor Mirabilis* (Faber and Faber, 1964) has this shown as finely as in *Black Easter*, the story of a munitions executive who turns to black magic to satisfy his thwarted delight in large-scale destruction.

The story is based solidly on the grimoires and *Keys* "of practicing magicians working in the Christian tradition."

Quoting a little more from the

Author's Note, the book deals "with what real sorcery had to be like if it existed." The closest approach here that I recall is in Heinlein's *Magic, Inc.* and that is a playful book, researched just enough.

This book, though witty, sardonic, and brilliant, is not playful. It deals with the real menaces of our day, in particular unlimited self-indulgence and the profit-urge run riot. But it held this reader in an iron grip.

There is a wonderful and appropriate jacket painting in black and white by Judith Ann Lawrence.

Once more to quote the author, "This novel completes a trilogy with the over-all title of *After Such Knowledge*. The previous volumes (which are independent of each other except for subject matter) are *Doctor Mirabilis* and *A Case of Conscience*."

I believe that here subject matter means more than science and religion. I think the chief linking theme is stated by Dr. Hess in *Black Easter*: "It [the human mind] can only take so much accumulated knowledge, and then it panics, and starts inventing reasons to throw everything over and go back to a Dark Age . . . every time with a new, invented mystical reason."

This fits nicely with the trilogy title, which presumably derives from a sentence in T. S. Eliot's poem "Gerontion": "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"—especially if one recalls the earlier line, "Signs

are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!' "

Doctor Mirabilis, which still awaits (surely wryly!) American publication, is a vision of the life of Roger (not Sir Francis) Bacon, the 13th Century Franciscan, who was probably the first man to see and set down clearly the principles of experimental science: "Neither the voice of authority, nor the weight of reason and argument are as significant as experiment, for thence comes quiet to the mind." Blish believes that Bacon even previsioned Einstein's theory of general relativity.

It is an exciting book requiring careful reading. And a moving book—Bacon's years of solitary confinement wrench the heart. There are many convincing scenes and glimpses of the Middle Ages—I was struck by the financial equivalence of paying manuscript copyists then and buying computer time now.

Returning to Dr. Hess's statement, the 13th Century was still a time of fear of knowledge, when church and laity were doubtful of the wisdom of reviving Classical knowledge, let alone building further on it. Also, Bacon has a fever dream of Armageddon, which may be a vision of the coming of Antichrist, but also a subjective prophecy of a nuclear holocaust.

There remains *A Case of Conscience* (Ballantine, 1958, and at last to be published in hard cover by Walker and Company). Here Armageddon takes place on another planet: Lithia and its innocent, intelligent inhabitants are destroyed by careless exploitation of its radioactives by earth men at the same time

as, ironically, the planet is exorcised by the Roman Catholic Church. Dread of new knowledge and a search for a mystical reason for its destruction are both at work.

But neither religion, nor science is the villain of these three books, but rather self-will, self-centeredness, greed, and lack of empathy and self-discipline. While fanatics are always a menace, whether their obsession be religion, science, or black magic. And in *Black Easter* the sorcerer Theron Ware and the scientist Dr. Hess both rationalize their actions on the grounds that they are simply working for the client or the boss.

Or one can view the villains as Bacon's four corrupting errors: "submission to faulty and unworthy authority; submission to what it was customary to believe; submission to the prejudices of the mob; and worst of all, concealment of ignorance by a false show of unheld knowledge, for no better reason than pride."

There are no other needs than those for the human mind to panic at accumulating knowledge, but rather hold firm to experimental science, whence "comes quiet to the mind."

A GLASS OF STARS, by Robert F. Young, Harris-Wolfe & Co., Jacksonville, Ill., \$5.95.

Every science-fantasy writer has his own chosen field of sorcery—romantically speaking, that is, not in the literal sense of *Black aster*. Each has the recipe he blends most skillfully.

Young's is the love philter. Not hero-making alcohol, nor reality-synopating weed, nor dream-bright-

ening LSD, but the essence sipped by Nicolette and Aucassin, Juliet and Romeo, and the Girl From the North Country and Bob Dylan.

Young also is a problem-solver and generally manages a happy ending, sometimes through the resourcefulness of his lovers, sometimes through Fate while his lovers need only be brave.

Like Tolkien, Young chiefly concerns himself with what is noble and youthful, rather than old and cruel. Tolkien's main topic is the friendship of adventurers. Young's is romantic heterosexual love. And sometimes when he writes wistfully of the long voyages between planets and the delight of touching earth again—whether it be Terra, Golden Grain, Forget Me Not, or Iago Iago—he makes one recall Thomas Wolfe's nostalgia for lonely night trains and locomotive whistles sounding across the prairie.

This book is beautifully put together, with tall pages, short lines, and a charmingly literal jacket illustration by M. Shelton.

—Fritz Leiber

DARK SHADOWS: Created by Dan Curtis, written and developed by Art Wallace. ABC television: four p.m. Monday-Friday.

Bear with me a moment and follow this line of plot development:

The vampire, Barnabas, having entered the modern world after being released from the coffin where he was restrained for nearly two hundred years, is injured in an auto accident at night. The doctor who treats him in emergency ward recognizes Bar-

nabas' condition and offers to cure it. The doctor knows so much because he has been working on a project involving life forces; and it is an alternation in life forces which causes vampirism. If he drains the portion of Barnabas' life force off into some other object, Barnabas will become normal. And the good doctor has just such an object: the body of a man he has built from spare parts. The doctor calls the body: Adam.

In draining the life force, it is, of course, purified, so that Adam will not become a vampire, merely a living being. The experiment is successful: Adam lives; Barnabas is cured. But . . . a warlock, sworn to the service of the Devil, who is already concerned with Barnabas, discovers that Adam, not being born of man and woman, represents a new race—a race that may worship Satan. The Devil may have found his weapon to counter God's creation of man. But to be sure, he must force the creation of a mate for Adam: Eve. Barnabas would like to stop him. But both sides are constrained by learning that the life forces now in Barnabas and Adam are linked. If Adam dies, Barnabas will become a vampire once more. If Barnabas dies, Adam will die.

The game begins.

What, you may well ask, is all this?

It's *Dark Shadows*; a soap opera you can watch every afternoon at four on ABC television. The plot is, of course, far more complicated than I dare let on. I have watched it fairly regularly for over a year and I recommend it to you.

Dark Shadows is a fine piece of fantasy as we've had since *Conjure*

Wife: and for the same reason. The plot elements are fantasy but the characters are realistic and believable. Barnabas is a human being who had unwillingly become a vampire; he cannot control what he is, but he can regret it and struggle against it. All the characters on the show are recognizable as people: they walk and talk and love and hate and go to the office and answer mail and live. They might be the (perhaps more intelligent) family on the next block facing problems that your neighbors never had; but acting and reacting as your neighbors might if they had to face them.

Which is not to imply that they are uninteresting—or smaller than life—they are life-size, and in that lies the program's greatest strength. The realism combined with fantasy creates that willing suspension of disbelief so few works have.

Dark Shadows follows, not the tradition of the modern gothic-romance, but the darker traditions of Le Fanu and Dunsany and *Weird Tales*. The writing and plotting are both up to a good standard. If excellent fantasy delights you, watch it for a week, and then make up your mind.

—Hank Stine

(Continued from page 5)

stakes—and all you have to do to win the Sweep is buy a ticket.

Or security. A writer has no illness plans, no paid vacations, no pensions. You are as good as your last book, plus reprint rights. If you're *really* lucky, a phrase of yours can go right into public circulation and stay there—without credit or cash to you. How many people remember Charles Dudley Warner ("Everybody talks about the weather . . .") or Jerome K. Jerome ("I like work. It fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours")? If you

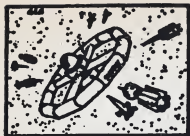
come up with a phrase that solid, you don't get any more money for it—but nobody knows who you are anyhow, so why worry?

Now: I'm a writer. It's too late for me.

But for you folk out there, there may still be time. Do something else. Something pleasant, say, and rewarding. Writing, like virtue, is mostly its own reward, after all—and you don't need anything all *that* selfless, now, do you?

Of course not.

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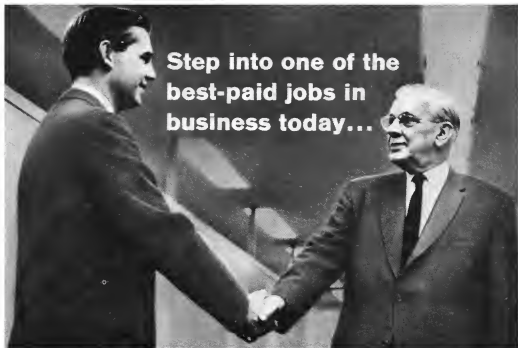
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